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OR,
A Cold Wave at Black Dam.

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WITH THE DROP," "A SPORT IN SPECTA-
CLES," "PISTOL PARDS," "HANDS UP,"
"MAGIC MIKE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

POCKET PETE'S PLEDGE.

A SORRIER-LOOKING burro never climbed over the mountain road that led toward Bunco. Add to that the fact that the miserable quadruped carried a human being, who looked as though he might weigh the more of the two, and was certainly in the better kelter, and the procedure almost looked like an insult to the lively little burg toward which they were crawling.

Nevertheless, the man seemed perfectly contented with the arrangement; and if the burro had any objections they were carefully con-

THEN THE BIG RIDER FOUND HIMSELF SITTING ON TOP OF A DEFUNCT DONKEY.

cealed. The question had probably been discussed and settled, for it plodded on in a heart-broken way, that would have held a snail in a gallop just about neck and neck.

"Nine mile ter Bunco," remarked the rider, in an audible tone, as he drew rein on turning a bend in the mountain trail and catching a view of the valley below. "That's 'bout what I should jedge. A tenderfoot, lookin' t'other way, might say it war an even forty-rod, an' it may turn out a two-days' march; but I calkerlate I kin strike it by sundown. Ef I don't—waal—"

The sentence ended in a sudden grunt, which was, however, drowned in the sharp crack of a pistol fired at close range. Then the late rider found himself sitting on top of a defunct donkey. The bullet had done its work so quickly that the burro hadn't time enough to realize that it was dead.

Of course this was no chance shot, as the man very well knew; yet the only matter of surprise was that it had not been his head instead of the donkey's that was drilled. Into his pockets dove his hands, in almost as quick time as the report; then, with the wisdom of experience, he remained perfectly motionless as he heard a harsh voice:

"Don't yer move, durn yer, er there'll be a cold pilgrim on ther trail. It would be a cussed sight easier ter throw you than ther mule. Ther's six ov us, an' every ding-blasted one hez yer 'lined!'"

"Mule be hanged!" growled the victim, without a sign of a quaver in his tone. "It war nothin' but a leetle rat ov a burro, an' I stole it at that. Ef yer wanted me ter stop why didn't yer say so? I don't b'lieve thar's no six ov yer, anyhow; an' ef you'll show yer ugly mug I'll fight yer fur love er money."

"Let him hear you tune your instruments," broke in another voice. "If we wanted cold meat we could have had it; and when he knows what he has to deal with maybe he'll listen to reason."

The "tuning" began, and the incredulous traveler listened to the cocking of half a dozen revolvers, the sounds following each other in such rapid succession as to preclude the possibility of their being made by the same hand.

"Give it up, pards. You lay 'way over me. No use ter try ter foller suit, so I'll bunch my cards. I've neither ace, face, nor trump."

"Then we'll give you a chance to talk a little, and you had better do it very straight. The first crook in your tongue, and down goes your meat-wagon."

"All right. Ef you know ther story better ner I do maybe you'd better tell it, an' let me hoof it on to Bunco. I didn't want ter wring inter this picnic."

"That's enough. You are cool now, but the chances are that you'll be cooler yet before the breakfast dishes are cleared up. It won't take long to decide. Who are you, where do you come from, and where are you going?"

Hitherto the solitary traveler had remained sitting astride the body of the burro, just as it had sunk under him. Now he threw his right leg over by the side of his left one, expectorated calmly, and looked up in the direction whence came the sounds.

There was no one in sight; but he could see very well the sort of ambushade into which he had fallen. Behind various rocks and bushes the outlaws lurked, and his sharp eyes could only detect, here and there, the gleam of a barrel.

"Ther's heads fur a reasonable long sermon in that string, an' it ain't so easy ter answer 'em all. I kin only tell yer what I think. My name's Pocket Pete; I'm from all over the West; an' I did reckon on goin' ter Bunco."

"Your errand there?"

"Chaw bacon ez long ez the burg could stand ther expense. Then turn me toes up to ther daisies er go on to another camp that loved poker more, an' money less. I'm a boss at everything but hard work, an' they say there's an openin' fur sich down yonder."

He jerked his head in the direction of Bunco.

"We can find a better opening for you right here. Your story is straight enough as far as it goes, and I have an idea that I have heard of a card sharp who went by the name which you give; but I am afraid that we can't trust you sufficiently well to allow you to proceed. Bunco don't want to encourage people of your stamp. Besides, we have heard that a man answering pretty well to your description was on the way for this section, and that he meant to wage war on us, when he arrived. Upon the whole, I think the world has no further use for you. Number One, ready; take aim, low; fire!"

And, just as the last command rung out out, Pocket Pete with wonderful skill threw himself over backward, his hands grasping his revolvers as he went.

The bullet zipped by his head, so closely that there could be no question about the intentions or the marksmanship of "Number One." He shot to kill, and put his bullet where he aimed for. If Pocket Pete got his skull out of the way just in time no blame to him.

"Thunder an' blazes! Ef ther mangy leetle burro hed on'y bin a ellerphunt! Hug ther ground close, Peter, er you'll go up ther flume

in a monst'us hurry; an' ther' ain't much ter hinder, anyway."

True as preaching were the points in his soliloquy. The shrewd move had only been of temporary avail. A ball from a carbine would go through and through the body of the burro, and meantime his own body was not completely covered from the sight of those on the higher ground. To remedy that he hastily wormed himself partly beneath the burro, and then attempted to peer out from under the neck of the animal.

A hoarse laugh followed the movement.

"We have him on the back seat now; plug it to him, boys!" ordered the leader, and as he spoke Pocket Pete fired a chance shot at the spot from whence the voice seemed to come.

A low grunt followed the offer, and then a rattling discharge of fire-arms mingled with a cheer as Pocket Pete bounced into the air and rolled ten feet away, with a series of convulsive kicks. This time the men in the ambushade were satisfied, and broke cover at once. At the same time, however, a horseman, whose approach had not been noted, dashed around the turn.

"Give it to 'em, pards!" the new-comer shouted. "It's a bloody gang of road-agents. The more you put down the less they'll take up!"

His outstretched hand held a revolver, that made lively music as he came; and at the same time the seemingly dying man appeared to gain a new lease on life, for, stretched on his back as he was, he began firing over his head.

At the double surprise the road-agents threw up their game with a wonderful suddenness. None of them had dropped, but there were two or three wounded; and they scurried back into cover without fairly catching sight of the man who had chipped into the game so lively. That he was not alone could be told by the nearing clatter of hoofs, and the outlaws were not ready for a fight on even terms, at least until they knew what was to be gained by it. They mounted the horses that were hidden further back, and dashed off up a blind trail, along which it would be as dangerous as useless to follow.

"Reg'ler Injuns," remarked Pocket Pete, rising coolly to his feet. "Kerry off the'r dead an' badly wounded. I didn't hev much show, but I'll swear my lead warn't altergether wasted, an' you put yourn whar it could do some good. Shake, stranger. You done me a good turn, an' when I hev ther chance I'll pay et back. Just put that promise in yer pocket an' salt it down."

He gazed around keenly enough as he spoke, and gave a little start of partial recognition.

The man at whom he was looking was of the age of thirty, or thereabouts, tall, straight as an arrow, with well-rounded chest, bright, black eyes, and hair that fell, soft as a woman's, in a great mass of curls that fairly covered his shoulders. His white teeth showed themselves under his silken mustache as he smiled, and the only blot upon his physique was the empty sleeve that told that an arm was missing. By this time several other horsemen had ridden up and were looking excitedly around.

"I s'pose I kin call yer name, too; though I dunno ez we ever met afore. One-Armed Dave's ther handle I've heard most frequent named; an' they said yer war a holy terror. From what leetle I've seen I'm ready to b'lieve it."

"I suppose I am the man that should answer to the name, though Granger—David Granger—suits me better. Who are you, and what has happened? I saw there were half a dozen on one and didn't wait; but I think I hit it about right."

"I should smile. Yer couldn't 'a' hit it better ef yer wanted Pocket Pete saved from bein' salted down. They jumped me onawares, an' after a leetle chin-chin began ter pump lead. I war goin' ter run my chances tryin' ter slide off'm yander rock; but, when you asked fur cards I stayed in, pat. What they war after me fur, blamed ef I kin tell. I jist fancy they made ther mistake ov ther season. Fur lead I kin show good indecashuns; but fur plunder I don't pan out wuth a cent."

"So I should jedge. Well, I've got a man to meet, and I see the boys didn't follow far on the trail, and are coming back. You had better paddle out of here as fast as legs will carry you if you want to make camp to-night. If there's anything I can do fur you down there, when we meet again spit it out. So long!"

The party seemed to be in a hurry and none of the rest questioned Pocket Pete, who followed on down the mountain-side, gradually falling more and more behind.

CHAPTER II.

A PLEASANT PROSPECT FOR SOMEBODY.

As he plodded on, Pocket Pete kept a sharp eye about him. There was but little danger of another ambushade, but there was a possibility that the outlaws might return to the attack, and he did not intend to be caught napping, even if, in his soul, he was yearning for a chance to try the discussion over again, with the chances a little nearer even.

"Dog-gone 'em," he thought; "they didn't mount me fur nothin'; but ef they didn't hev ther wrong pig by ther ear then my mother's

eldest monkey are a liar ov ther first water. Didn't know that Pocket Pete hed sich a perocious look thet they'd run ther chances ov a knock-down. I'll swar it warn't coin they was after. What war it then? Am I, er ain't I; an' ef so, which? I'm out a burro; an' it kinder spites me that I ain't in a couple road-agents. Blamed ef I ain't a notion ter try an' find out what it's all about, and see ef I cain't git even."

He halted and looked warily around.

Bunco had vanished from sight, and so had the spot of the late engagement. He was in a hidden bend of the trail; and if he could not see far in every direction neither could he be seen, while on either side a hiding-place was an easy matter to find.

He made a sudden decision, and, without further debate, darted to the upper side of the trail, and was lost to view.

It was not worth while to follow him step by step; enough that before long he halted again, as suddenly as he had started. His hearing was of the sharpest, and he became aware that some one was approaching.

"Hyar's yer chance," he thought, as he dropped to the ground to listen; and once down he remained there as if glued. Some one was evidently coming straight for the spot, while some one else was advancing from the Bunco trail, over much the same ground that Pete had taken. Either he was between two fires, or he might be in the way to assist at a little war.

Which it was to be eyesight could give him no hint, as he could neither see nor be seen. The hollow into which he had dropped had its advantages as well as its disadvantages.

Then the one set of footsteps seemed to stop, while the other came fearlessly on, passing him at a distance of several rods, and finally reaching the spot where the first had halted.

"Here at last, are you?" asked a voice, which Pete recognized at once as belonging to the man who had led the attack half an hour or so before. "Did you meet any one on the trail?"

"Didn't I? You bet!"

A smothered curse followed the answer.

"Oh, don't stir up yer bile. That don't go fur ter say thet they met me. Betcher life they didn't meet me—er ef they did it war too fur ter make anything outen it. When I seen 'em comin' I took ter kiver, an' they jist sailed by. Who was they, anyhow?"

"How the fiend do I know? Was there a man on foot with them, or anywhere near them?"

"No. But thar war one anamile thet kerried two, which are 'bout ther same thing. What's ther matter with them?"

"I'd give a hundred for you to say true that one of them was dead."

"Shell out. Deescribe ther galoot, an', on them terms, ef he ain't he soon will be. Who are my mutton?"

"Dry up with your nonsense. We was laying for him at the bend above and thought we had him, sure, but he got away with our luggage. Played the drop game on us and then the rest chipped in. The boys ran like the infernal cowards they are. Who'd have thought that they would have stumbled along this trail? They must have been up in the mountains, prospecting."

"But what did you want to drop the man for? Any special deposits of coin with him?"

"Better reason than that. There wasn't enough wealth in the whole outfit to buy the fifth wheel of a hearse. He was one of the infernal stag-hounds sent out to pull Captain Snow down. His name was Pocket Pete, as he gave it."

The other burst into a harsh laugh.

"Pocket Pete! That's a good one. He's more a eagle than a pigeon, an' I don't just reckon he's lookin' for agents, onless ter shoot 'em on his own hook. Why, blame it, he's sport from ther ground up; an' a mighty onhandy man ter hev on yer trail. You'd 'a' better let him go through. He ain't gineraly chippin' in a outside game; but when he does, it comes with a rush."

"You're mistaken for once. He answers exactly to the description, and the 'danger-warnings' are all over him. I made sure of that before I called him."

"That shows what some people don't know."

"Read that letter, that Tomasso brought in. If that's not enough to act on when you find a man to fill the bill, you can call me what you choose."

There was a brief silence. Then the outlaw leader went on:

"He got clean away it seems; and he deserved to. We knew he was a bad man, and should have killed him first and asked questions about him afterward. We would have been on the safe side then."

"That's all kibosh. I've heard from the boss, too, an' ef yer notiss, it's a day later, that our man will be hyar. He ain't comin' this way, either. Hyar's ther deescription, an' I come out speshly ter find out how ter run ther thing. Thar don't seem ter be any d'rection thet jist 'plies ter his case."

"Um. You may be right, after all. If so, we've done an infernal foolish thing. All the

same, it's better to take a few risks than to have the wrong man get in. If you have a chance, slaughter this Pocket Pete, anyhow, and keep eyes open for the other man, who *can* fill the bill. It's the last racket we'll have to work around here, before we pull stakes, and it must be done right."

"But how d'yer want it done? It's all right fur you fellers up in the mountain, but fur us in town—when a eperdemie starts, the lead fever are apt ter lay us cold."

"Bah. What do you consider yourself good for? Get up a little gang of toughs, meet him alone, and then mash him."

"Sounds mighty easy, but it'll take coin ter git up ther gang; an' they may ketch on ter a weasel, jest ther same ez you did."

"Dry up on that," commanded the other, sternly. "I wanted to have a chance to size him up, and I took a little too long doing it. See that you don't make the same mistake. Now, the sooner you get back to town the better. If you see the old man before I do, tell him things are soaking."

The conference was over, the principal object of which seemed to be the exchange of letters; and the two separated, each returning in the direction whence he came. After a time Pocket Pete arose, and went on his way toward Bunco.

He was tolerably well satisfied with the result of his investigations.

"I *nowt* hev took 'em both in ef I'd run a leetle reesk; but et war onsart'in; an' I kinde think I've got a better thing this way. All I've got ter do are ter freeze on ter ther owner ov that vice in Bunco, an' I kin hev all ther fun I want, an' git even fur ther burro several times over. I'll do it, too. Jist salt that down."

He went slowly and cautiously for a time, being careful not to get into sight from the trail above, nor to risk coming suddenly upon the man who preceded him, in case, for any reason, he should linger on the way.

Darkness came down on the lonely pedestrian; still he strode on; for the trail was clearly defined, and the town not so far ahead. Probably he made almost as good progress as if he bestrode the burro—leaving out of account the time lost in the stoppage. When he rolled up to the Jefferson House he came in the most inconsequential way possible, and a stranger to see him stepping in would have thought he always lived there.

CHAPTER III.

BART BRANDT STEPS IN FROM 'WAY BACK.

THE journey of the day had been a tough one, but when Pocket Pete had washed off the grime of the road and surrounded a square meal, such as the traveler was sure at any time of finding at the Jefferson House, he was ready for a jaunt about town. The hotel itself was kept in quieter style than the average hash-house of a brisk mining-camp; and unless it was quiet and slumber that he wanted the house was rather slow.

So he expressed himself, filing the edge a little off of his current vernacular, and rising up with a yawn from the seat he had been temporarily occupying on the porch.

"Slow? It's beginning to crawl backwards. Jefferson might coin money if he would throw out any inducements for a quiet little game in the back room. Instead of that he starts 'em all off up street to 'The Lair.' Maybe he has an interest in that too? If he hasn't he throws away a chance for good money."

"Ye'r' an old hand 'round hyar, then?" asked Pete, looking up sharply at the speaker, who was a little man, dressed in the very neatest style, slow of voice, but with a snap in his eye that suggested that he might be a good deal more rapid than he looked.

"About a week old; but I think I've got pretty nearly down to the bottom of the burg. I'm going up to 'The Lair' now and if you'll turn your steps that way I'll insure that you find things lively. Barret is my name, sometimes called Cool Cal."

"I've heered it. Pocket Pete are mine. Drive ahead! I'm with yer that fur on the journey."

Together the two left the Jefferson House and strolled toward "The Lair," which was the name of the popular gambling saloon that had lately been opened.

It was not a very long walk, but all the way Pete kept a keen eye on his companion, though otherwise he showed no suspicion. In this was one of the gang he had lately interviewed. Pete intended that he should have all the opportunity he wanted to show his hand; though he did not look to be the kind of a desperado that would follow the orders of the mountain outlaw.

Cal Barret strolled along peaceably enough until they came near to The Lair; then he dashed forward in sudden haste, with Pocket Pete close at his heels.

From the amount of noise within, times were lively there, and the temperature still rising.

When Pocket Pete had fairly got inside of the door, he could see at once what was going on. There was a row of the first water, though so far neither knives nor pistols had been used. A dozen men were striking at one, who stood at bay, his hands well up and his arms moving in

a scientific way, as he warded off stroke after stroke.

Perhaps the new arrival caused him to change his tactics, though it is more likely that the time had come when he was ready to assume the offensive.

He was a well-built, handsome man, who did not seem in the least alarmed about the probable result. With a great spring he flung himself into the midst of his assailants and began to hit out right and left, no longer attempting to parry the blows aimed at him, though all of them now failed to connect.

Pocket Pete halted just inside the door, and, with folded arms, viewed the scene. He saw Cal Barret jerk out a pistol and throw his hand up, the barrel of his weapon covering a man who was about to draw.

"Don't, sonny!" warned Barret, with a quiet drawl. "If it's fists, go for him; he looks as though he could stand off a dozen. If it's irons you want to use, you might mention it to him before the shuffle for the new deal. If you try any foul play, I'll blow you cold."

His left hand rested on the shoulder of the ruffian as he spoke, and the muzzle of his weapon was close to his ear. There wasn't a particle of doubt but that he meant what he said, and had the chance to make his words good.

The fellow looked around in a bewilderment that was only increased by the sight of the strange and stern face so close to his own. Cal Barret was not more than half his size, but with his decks cleared for action, looked as though he might weigh a ton.

"Git!" continued Barret, a wicked frown darkening his face.

"I've got!" answered the man, as, breaking away from the gripe, he swung himself out of the window that was conveniently near.

Watching this, because it was taking place right under his nose, Pocket Pete lost the best part of the hurricane fight, which was now about over. Half a dozen men were on the floor, or crouching around with stained faces and limp legs, while, with a revolver in each hand, the man whose fists had done such execution was making some very solid remarks.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a tone so cold that it was savage, "my name is Barton Brandt, and I'm considered, by those who have tackled me, to be a bad man from 'way back. You've had your little fun with the stranger who wouldn't allow you to drink at his expense until it pleased him to shout. Now, if there's any thirsty souls in the gang lean right up against the bar; and if there's any one here that's not dry he wants to get right out and leave room for a better man. If he don't take that advice there will be a demand for shutters and wooden overcoats. You hear me? Johnny, set 'em up for the house!"

The speaker held the floor and the drop together, and no one wanted to argue. Several roughs who were decidedly groggy were led out by friends, and the balance moved up to the bar without the least hesitation.

"He's a stunner on wheels, an' hits hard enough ter drive a spike," thought Pocket Pete, as he strolled up with the rest. "Wonder if he's the comin' man? He's good ernuf fur anything; but I'll swar he don't look much like me."

Which was a very true observation. In spite of the work he had just done, Bart Brandt had more the appearance of a prosperous mine-owner with a trifle of an inclination toward sport, than of a bad man from 'way back, as he had announced himself, while Pocket Pete looked about as "wild and woolly" as there was any use for. Between the two men it was not likely that any great amount of intimacy would be established, though, if Brandt had known the thoughts that were agitating the mind of the man to whom he gave a coldly careless nod, he might have scrutinized him a little more closely.

When the dress parade had formed and the tumblers been inverted with a simultaneous movement, Brandt turned to Cool Cal Barret:

"Not a drinking man I see? Right enough. I don't quaff the flowing bowl myself, any more than I can avoid. It don't do in *our* profession."

The suspicion of a flush drifted over Barret's face. He had not gone up to the bar with the rest, and it might be that his neglect would be considered a cause of war. His eye glittered, though his speech was coolly measured.

"Thanks. You've hit the blot in Cool Cal. When I drink I do nothing else, and this is not my night for a spree. I take it you don't consider it any disrespect on my part."

"Oh, stop, right there! I have eyes and I saw the good little turn you did me a moment or so ago. I was too busy to say, 'thanks' but I felt it all the same. When the fool with the pistol went out of the window I just felt like shouting, 'hallelujah!'"

The two laughed together cordially, and Pocket Pete, who had been watching them in a furtive way, saw that there was small chance for his intervention being needed. As he had come there in company with the smaller man he felt committed to his interests, even though Cal Barret had dropped him when more important game was started.

"I didn't want to hurt the man, of course,"

continued Barret; "but with the odds so big against you it would have been just murder to have passed out, and I chipped, even if it was going to spoil my chance for a game."

"It shan't do that. If you've got nothing better in view I'm ready for a shy myself. I know the cards by name, and play up to the limit."

The bad man from 'way back spoke in a bantering tone, widely different from the earnest one of the other. It was even hard to say positively that he was in real earnest.

"Good enough! I've found nothing here that would pay my expenses, and was thinking about leaving in disgust. The men I've met here haven't nerve enough to risk a hundred on an ace full, and they wouldn't borrow to raise on a straight flush. What's your game?"

"Oh, I'm not at all particular," answered Brandt, with a short little laugh, that might have had a great deal of meaning in it. "I may have a preference for 'draw,' but I think I play most games as well as the man that invented them. If you've no objections we'll have some poker with the bark off, and then, if we have another sitting, you can name *your* vanity."

"One name is about the same as another to me, too. Only, now and then, a fellow has to play against a streak, and it does him good to change the game. It's as fair for one as the other, as no one knows, yet, who is going to be behind."

"I'd stake money on it that I could name the man," retorted Brandt.

"So would I; and I wouldn't name the same man, either. Yet the best of us strike a streak sometimes; and so must one of us. It might be I, to-night, for I'm not so well healed as usual though I'm looking fer funds. If we both stay in this region we'll fight it out if it takes all summer. I'm one of the kind that stays till the last horn blows, and a little longer. In the long run and a square game I just think there's no living man can beat me handling the pasteboards. My money's always been ready to say the same thing."

Pocket Pete was an unnoticed listener to this chaff, and he saw something which the two, severally, did not.

"Blame me, ef they ain't jest stirrin' each other up, tryin' ter git a mad on t'other. Eyes open, Peter, thar's suthin' mighty odd hyer, an' now's yer chance to snatch it."

No one objected when he followed the two into an adjoining room, which was separated by a curtain from the bar-room. The spot was a little less public; and in an earnest way the two seated themselves to play draw, with their money out, and every prospect for a ferocious game.

CHAPTER IV.

TWO SPORTS MAKE AN APPOINTMENT.

"THE Lair" was an accommodating sort of a house, that provided its patrons just what they wanted, and so retained their good will.

In the bar-room things went on in a rough-and-tumble sort of way that was suited to all comers, but in the room beyond, which was dedicated to chance, everything was down to a line.

The room could be reached through a passage from the bar, and also by a rear entrance which was even more carefully guarded. Around this shrine of fortune money talked and whisky didn't.

The proprietor, Izzy Abrahams, ran the faro-table for all it was worth; but the short-card men were always welcome; and were never made to feel that they were at all in the way. The place was open to spectators, who, as long as they behaved themselves, loitered around the layout without hesitation; but the smaller tables, that were set on the opposite side of the room, were kept free from loungers, so that a man was not usually troubled with outside remarks or inspection of the strength of his game.

Nevertheless, Pocket Pete, who had cheek enough to ignore all rules, managed to assume a position where he could watch the game, in which he had a peculiar interest.

In spite of the "chin music" the two men were evidently adepts, and from the start played a bold, heavy, yet strictly square game. In point of science they seemed to be well-matched, but from the very first deal luck inclined to the side of Bart Brandt.

"Ther's suthin' 'bout that game ez I don't reecognize ther true innardness ov. They can't be any bad blood betwixt 'em, er ther leetle sport wouldn't 'a' chipped in so sudden when Brandt war in luck. Mebbe he's playin' a deep game; an' mebbe he's only mad 'cause he sees it ain't his night on, an' yit hates ter quit. Thunder an' brimstone, how they sling coin! Ef this Brandt hadn't dropped inter ther road, an' I could 'a' caught Barret in a streak like that I c'd 'a' struck him fur all he's wuth. I ain't sure ez I ortn't ter read ther riot act fur jest stealin' ther funds that were droppin' plum in my pocket. Dog-gone it!"

Pocket Pete's disgust was natural. Barret would never have got his *sobriquet* of Cool Cal from the way he was playing that night. He was already a thousand out, and the tide rising; while the features of Brandt in all the game never varied by a wrinkle of a hair's breadth. Win or lose his face looked like a waxen mask—not a particle of meaning in it—though Barret

studied it often enough, gazing as if he expected to read something there.

"Sorry," said he, suddenly. "It would be worth while to run the game on as far as you would take it, just to get the cold truth about your style of playing; but I must save enough for current expenses till my ship comes in, the latter part of the week. I call."

He covered Brandt's last raise of a hundred, and sat keenly watching the face of his *vis-a-vis*.

"Good enough!" he added, as Bart threw down three trays and a pair of kings. "Good enough! I only wanted to know what you had on principle or I'd have saved the last hundred. Now, about the next sitting: Save yourself up a little for I'll be after you a week from to-night, with a fresh supply of boodle. I was a fool not to bring my pack along; yet perhaps it's as well as it is."

Just at the last moment a change had come over Cal Barret's face; and Pocket Pete, attracted by something in his voice, was watching it with a freshened curiosity. It seemed strange that the loss of his last available dollar should be giving him so much satisfaction.

Bart Brandt looked at the other coldly.

"While I'm in Bunco, I'm at your service, but I'm afraid if you can't hurry that boodle up a bit I won't be able to accommodate you. I've got a camp or two to make and then I'm due at Black Dam. A lively little burg it is, and my brother, Judge Bailey Brandt, just about runs it. About the time you're speaking of we'll be shedding fraternal tears over each other, and swearing how little each has changed in all these years."

Brandt was leaning back in his chair, regarding the other with a dry sort of smile, while his hands hung in suspicious readiness at his sides. If he was trying to provoke the other to anger he was also ready for the result.

Barret was all himself. There was a cheerful smile on his not unhandsome face as he laid his arms before him on the table.

"Black Dam, eh? I've heard of it—a brisk little town as you say, where you always get the worth of your money and the right change back. If you'll make the chance worth while I'll meet you there."

"Worth while—nothing!" retorted Brandt a little harshly. "I'll play you for all the stakes you choose to put up; and then, win or lose, we'll quit."

"Give me your hand on that. You're not the man to squeal when the cards run rough—neither am I. Put it there."

For the first time Bart hesitated. Then he hastily caught the hand that was extended toward him.

"For any stakes I choose. Don't you forget it; and when I freeze onto a man there's only one way to quit when I'm the loser. The man that goes broke has one more stake against the coin—a shot across the table. That's the kind of a hair-pin I am, Bart Brandt. Where and when will I find you there?"

"I didn't know you were crazy as a loon, but I don't go back from the word I've given my hand on. Ten days from this hour—ten o'clock—I'll meet you at Burke's 'Emporium,' in Black Dam, and win your money, and—the rest. Now, there is no use to waste further time. I didn't drop in here for business, and I'm going back to Jefferson's to bunk in. If you can scratch a stake worth playing for I'll meet you sooner. If not—day-day till we meet at Black Dam."

Bart Brandt waited for no answer, but, rising from the table, went swinging across the room and out of the back entrance, without even a glance at the faro-table in passing, while all the time until he vanished from sight, Cal Barret's eyes followed him.

"You'd better stuck ter fu'st intensions, pard," said Pete in a low tone. "I'd hev gi'n yer a wrastle, but I see now you'd bin too good fur me. An' him—he's a rustler. His medercin' lays all over youn. I've heered on him afore. When yer play ther primmer with him ther more money yer put down ther less yer take up. He kin beat yer ary day in ther year, an' shoot yer dead fur a wind-up. That's advice. Jest put it in yer pocket an' salt it down."

"Not when I keep my head, and next time—"

Then he turned pettishly away, as though angry at himself for discussing the question with a stranger. It was doubtful if at that moment he recognized the man he had "picked up" at the Jefferson House. Without further debate he went his way, while Pocket Pete lounged out into the bar-room once more, and threw himself into a seat by the wall.

As he did so he saw an old letter on the floor. At the first glimpse he saw it, and nothing more.

At the second an idea struck him so hard that he could scarcely refrain from at once stooping down and picking it up, careless of what eyes might observe the movement. He compromised, however, by covering it with his foot, and waiting for his time.

The idea that came to him was that the letter might have dropped there on being torn from a pocket when Brandt and the toughs were engaged at close quarters. In such an event it might give him some information in regard to matters concerning which he was curious. He

had not given up the idea of getting even with the road-agents who had so nearly succeeded in extinguishing his spark.

He did not forget his caution, however. If any one saw him pick the letter up from the floor and the paper should contain any information it was quite possible that a word of inquiry would trace it home to him, and perhaps block some game that he might otherwise set up. He waited a little, scraped the letter well under him and finally held it in his hand without a shred of it at any time being visible. The next thing was to read it.

About the only plan was to leave the place altogether, and although he had his reasons for wishing to remain, he did not hesitate, but rose at once.

Before he went he gave a glance around the room. There were a score of men there, but he noted one of the crowd in particular, who must have just come in.

It was Dave Granger, the man who had so opportunely struck in to his rescue when the agents had him down on the mountain trail.

He was looking the other way, and Pocket Pete never appeared to notice him as he passed.

CHAPTER V.

THREE MEN HAVE A FAIR SHAKE.

FROM "The Lair" Pocket Pete went straight to the hotel, and in a very few moments was investigating the contents of his prize.

He had not been mistaken, either. Probably some one of the gang had got a gripe on Bart Brandt, and when it was broken loose the letter came along with it. That was what seemed to be the explanation of Pete; but he had yet to account for how the letter came to be in Bart Brandt's possession, since the document was addressed to a totally different person—Judge Bailey Brandt, of Black Dam. It ran something after this fashion:

"BAILEY BRANDT ESQ:—

"DEAR SIR: The money has been deposited as suggested, as you will see by the accompanying slips. The other matters have been attended to as requested, and as far as possible. I will write you further in the course of a few days. Now, let me bespeak your good offices for a client of mine, Mr. Solon Rand. Accompanied by his daughter he has visited the West for a double purpose. First, as he is a man of wealth and shrewdness, he has invested largely in mining ventures, guided by the reports of his agent in 'Frisco, and he is now here on a tour of inspection. So far, the result has been very satisfactory.

"In addition, he is searching for traces of the half-sister of his daughter, who, it seems, came to the West years ago. Mira Blair was her maiden name, but there seems to be some uncertainty about whether she was married or not. Mr. Rand is not the dullest man in the world, and I suspect that if it was not for the daughter the quest would not be so persistent. There is wealth in it, of course, and if the knowledge will help you I am glad to be able to give the point. You may make it of account, or you may only be able to find a purchaser at a fair price of some of the mining property of which you are generally possessed. In any event he will explain himself better than I can do it for him, and I hope you will do well. His daughter, by the way, is a very handsome young lady, and has money to back her.

Yours truly,

"AMASA SHIPPEN."

"Ther condemned rascal! That's what he's goin' ter Black Dam fur—ter take a squint at ther handsome young lady ez hez money ter back her! An' ther jedge hez sent him ther letter ter bring him thar! They're in caboots, an' up ter some kinder game; but this knocks ther s'picion thet he's layin' fur road-agents. He plays too stiff a hand at draw fur thet, anyhow. I'll hev ter go on furdur ef I want ter find a pard. An' it won't be Cool Cal, either. I've heered ov him afore. That crowd must 'a' mounted Brandt outen pure cussedness; an' it won't be safe ter back ther next man they tackle. I kin go back to 'Ther Lair' an' open me op-ticks ag'in."

At the saloon, however, he did not find much change in affairs. Dave Granger was not to be seen in the bar-room, and not caring to leave that point for observation he threw himself comfortably back to await the further developments of the evening. No one had so far paid any attention to him, and after the way the crowd had allowed Bart Brandt to slide out, he was of the opinion that Bunco was rather given to minding its own business except when it was specially after a row.

Part of that business, just now, seemed to be the discussion of the prowess of the stranger who had so neatly cleaned up the gang, the utter badness of which was better appreciated by the citizens than by a stranger.

Perhaps if Bart Brandt had had his work to do over again, he might have found more outsiders ready to chip in for the credit of the town; and, if there was any reliance to be placed in the talk that Pete overheard, the frolic might not be all over yet. Anyhow, there were a good many men there ripe for a row, which led Pocket Pete to consider seriously what would most likely be the occasion for the next concert by the band.

And while he was debating this in his mind, he heard the first notes of the orchestra. There was the noise of a pistol-shot in the room beyond, and the next instant a rush of footsteps

and a sound of struggling in the little passage that led to the bar-room.

Everybody sprung up, and a rush for the gambling-room was about to begin, when the curtain that hung across the entrance to the passage was torn violently away, and three or four struggling men burst into view.

First came three in a tangled mass, that then fell apart, showing, as two of them dropped to the floor when the support of the walls no longer held them up, the third, with his throat in the nervous gripe of Dave Granger's one hand!

The fingers suddenly loosened their hold; but before the man had time to stagger away, the fist went back and then shot forward in a mighty blow.

The man dropped to the floor as though he had been shot, and then Pocket Pete saw a little line of red on Granger's forehead, tracing where a bullet had grazed along.

Another man, indeed, might have been senseless from the apparently trifling wound; but Granger had a clear head and a cool brain. If he had not had them, probably he would have "passed in his checks" then and there. The man he had struck never moved; but of the others, one sprung from the floor, drawing as he did so, while the other never took the time, but whirling over on his back, jerked out a pistol.

While his thumb was forcing back the hammer, Dave Granger pulled and fired.

Then, as the man tumbled back, there was another crack, and the other man dropped, just as Granger seemed to turn toward him.

"Sorry to disturb you, gentlemen," he said, coolly, as he saw that there was no immediate danger in sight. "Three men mounted a cripple, and that's more than I can stand. I'm a cripple myself."

"Where's yer cripple, then? S'pose yer trot him out. There seems ter be two citizens ov Bunco floatin' away inter the cold hereafter, an' onless it's ther reg'ler thing fer a wind-up ter an evenin's amusement, 'pears ter me this hyar town orter know why."

"And why should you—" began Granger, hotly. Then he took a second look at Pocket Pete, who was the speaker, and uttered a short laugh, continuing in a quieter tone:

"After all, there's some sense in what you say. I'm a stranger here, and of course, when I seem to buck against men of the camp it is only natural that I should be expected to give an account of myself. One of you look in the other room, and bring the cripple in. Tell him he won't be hurt."

"An' while he's a-goin' s'pose yer enlighten Bunco ez ter why yer 'sheddin' the light ov yer countenance in here. Mebbe that'll explain the cause of ther racket."

"Rather rapid work if you've already been set up as a judge in Israel. All the same, my business here is no mystery. I am on my way to Black Dam, but as I had a chance to ride over with a party that was coming this way, and had a spare horse, I turned a little out of my road on the chance of meeting a man. I've met several, but they don't happen to be, either of them, the right one. Of course, once in Bunco, I had to take in 'The Lair,' and as I came in too late for the frolic which I hear you had in the early part of the evening, I suppose these men got up a little jamboree for my private benefit. They are all more scared than hurt, and if it's all the same to you, gentlemen, I would prefer that you stood a little more out of range, so that I can have some show when they get up again and begin to shoot."

"Talks ez slick ez a hoss-trader, an' kin lie ez fast," muttered one of the citizens who was listening. "But what's that got ter do with ther cripple?"

"A very natural question for the court to ask, if this is a court. Simply, as I remarked at the outset, the men who appeared to be drunk as lords took hold of him as he stood at the table, never interfering with any one with his twenty-five cent game. They weren't satisfied to crowd him out, but they began abuse, and when I put a word in in his favor, they turned on me. You all saw how it worked—and I'm responsible for the rest."

"That's a mighty slick yarn," interposed the messenger, "but I'm 'fraid ther filly won't trot. I've been in the other room, an' ther ain't no cripple there, an' ther ain't bin none. Hands out an' fingers empty! Till this thing's settled you're a pris'ner; an' ef ary of the boys hes hopped the twig an' turned croaker, it will be dear old fun. Bunco means biz, every time. There never weren't no cripple, an' he knows it. We orter hang a man ez tried to play us fur flats, ef fur nothin' else."

"Not there?" answered Granger, in a puzzled sort of tone. "That is strange; most likely he got scared and skipped. Any way I haven't done anything to murder a man about. I see that the man on my score is beginning to squint around again, as though he was ready for a drink and a fresh deal, and the other fellow don't belong to me, anyway. Come, there's nothing to slaughter me about, even if the cripple has skipped."

"There's hoss sense in that," responded Pete, speaking briskly as he saw the chance. "Ov course this ain't my circus, an' I only put my

say in ter give ther rest a spell ter breathe. I dunno ez how yer c'd ketch two at a time, an' you only one hand; but if you didn't who in blazes did? That's ther conundrum ez puzzles this old rooster."

At this moment the man from the floor was heard from, as the first of three sections. At least, the three men got up almost together, and spoke at about one and the same breath.

"Say, ef Bunco's wuth a cent she'll see thet we gits a show. This hoss don't squeal, when he runs ag'in' a muel, ez kicks at the word go; but durned ef he don't want a fair shake!"

"An' hyar too!" howled a second; while the third, rocking to and fro, as though scarcely able to stand, mumbled in chorus:

"Me too!"

"Waal, ef ary one ov yer wants a bigger shake than he's had, cussed ef he ain't a hog. I thort yer heads would waggle right off. An' strikes me ef a man wa'n't satisfied with what he got he oughtn't ter talk ter Bunco. It ain't done nothin'—it's Double-Shot Dave yer ort ter be speakin' to."

Pocket Pete had not been doing all the talking. Others had had their say, but his remarks had received proper attention, and his last brace of suggestions was greeted with a laugh while the *sobriquet* he fixed on the man with one arm pleased the fancy of the crowd.

"That's so, Tom," laughed one. "If you don't like the style he handled you whv don't you go for him and have it over? So far there don't seem to be no harm done, unless, between you, you've swallowed the cripple. Sail in."

"I can't," retorted the man. "I'm able fur him, with knife or gun, but ther other feller he got me kivered."

CHAPTER VI.

THE CRIPPLE TRIES TO TALK.

THE three men were not at all strangers to Bunco. They had trained around the town a month or more, under the leadership of the one just addressed as Tom, and had gained the reputation of being bad men to handle who were willing to take chances. In fact, if Tom Taylor was not a chief it was because he had not announced himself as such, and there would have been few if any willing to give odds against him, on any man in camp.

Now, to see not only him but his two associates handled so roughly by one man, and he of one arm, was more and more a satisfaction the longer the rest of the crowd considered it. At the complaint that was so near to a whine as to be positively doleful for a sympathetic soul to listen to, the laugh that had been started by Pocket Pete rose again, and went round the room. The "other fellow," was certainly not visible, and must be a myth.

But Pete was more interested in the disappearance of the cripple than he let on. Although he only understood in a general way how the *fracas* had started, he saw an explanation that had not appeared to present itself to any one else. The cripple might have been put there for the purpose of being routed, and the men who set up the job had not bargained for the hurricane way that Granger met an attack. There was possibly more behind the curtain somewhere, and Pete kept his eyes open accordingly.

Granger had been cool enough at the start, but now his wrath was rising.

"Why, confound you, what sort of a show do you want?" he exclaimed. "Do you expect when one man mounts three that he is going to ring the bell for a mile or so before he gets to the crossing? You had notice and the odds; after that I was looking out for myself. If you haven't had a stomach full I'll start even, at the drop of a hat, and fight you all three at once, any way you want it. But you can bet your sweet souls there will be some corpses lying around here when the fun is over. No more light play in mine."

As he spoke he had his revolver out and cocked, and the least motion of the wrist and a crook of the finger would send some one over the divide. The uncertainty of which one it would be was worse than having the tube fairly leveled. And meantime, there was something so tigerish in his stare, that the three actually shrunk back.

"Don't yer try it, stranger," growled Tom Taylor. "I don't want ter make no threats, but thar's three ov us, an' ef yer drops one, an' yer pard, whoever he is, drops another, it's certain death fur you anyhow. Put up yer pop-gun an' I'll fight yer fair."

"Fair! Yes, as you would have done before, if I had not been too quick for you. And yet—I never take a dare."

With a swift motion he thrust the weapon back in the belt from whence he had caught it, and stood with his fist clinched, and his arm well up across his breast.

"Come on now. There are enough here to see fair play, and I'll promise them fun enough to pay for their kindness."

"Ha, ha! Sold ag'in!" shouted Taylor. "Did yer think we was that kind ov hair-nins? Onter him, boys!"

As he spoke he bounded toward Granger, the

others following, and each of the three holding a knife in his upraised right hand.

Again came a double report, though this time it was uncertain who fired, or, for the moment, at what.

The first of the shots certainly came from the outside of the window, the ball hissing past Granger's head; the other shot was from a closer point, and was followed by a cry that came in from the darkness, and immediately afterward by the noise of a heavy fall.

"Thar's yer cripple now, I'll bet a gun!" sung out Pocket Pete, and at the same time he struck out left and right at the nearest two of the assailants, while Dave Granger floored the third with another of his terrific blows.

The two or three dozen spectators had been perfectly willing to let the fight go on, and Izzy Abrahams, the king of "The Lair" had seemed strangely apathetic over the riotous proceedings; but the limit had now been reached, beyond which, if matters went, the result must be a general *fracas*; and fortunately for the man of the one arm the people of Bunco were not yearning for a journey on the war-path. There was but little doubt that an attempt had been made to shoot Granger by some one who had been skulking without, and the treachery of the action, combined with the courage shown, by the stranger, causing a reaction among those who might otherwise have taken a hand against him. Four or five rushed out; and found a man writhing on the ground, with a bullet wound through his shoulder.

The villain would have resisted; but his pistol arm hung useless, and half a dozen strong hands held him tightly. He was carried inside.

As Dave Granger's eyes fell upon him, his lips were compressed tightly. In the man before him he recognized the store pigeon that had led him into trouble.

"That's the little man," he said, with disgust in his tone. "They are all in a bunch together. He played me for a flat, and made the turn. It's my treat, gentlemen. Just kick the four out, and say no more about it."

"But, say. Ef they've bin settin' up a cold deck like that this hyar camp orter know what it's all about. Ef it hed bin a knock in ther dark an' yer pockets turned inside out it wouldn't be so hard ter savey; but this jist beats cock-fightin'. I move we find out their lay er string 'em up—I ain't keerin' much which."

Pocket Pete was in good earnest, and his suggestion might have caught the popular mind, had it agreed at all with Granger's book. But the latter had suddenly regained control of his temper, and had his own views. He interposed.

"For a stranger, it seems to me, young man, you are remarkably fresh. The people of this burg don't need your advice; and if you go to wringing it in too freely you'll have to settle with me. If they put up a game it didn't work; and if I'm satisfied I don't just see where you come in. The boys wanted a little fun. They got it; and now the best thing I see is to stay quiet. If not I ask no odds, and can drive my own go-cart till I reach the range."

"That's all right; but hyar's a man plugged through ther shoulder, an' we'd like ter know who done it," persisted one of the men of Bunco.

"Put him on my record, if you choose. There's no great harm done. He'll be out tomorrow, a little stiff but as wicked as ever."

"Yes, but I reckon you can't shoot two ways to once, an' we like ter know ther truth when we hear it."

"Oh, hold yer hush," broke in Pete. "I'll swaller my words. He's a mighty chief, an' don't yer furgit it. He's Double-Shot Dave, ther man with ther left hand, an' that's reason ernuf fur ary man. I heard him say suthin' 'bout free drinks an' I'm dry ez a fish. Move we drink, and drop ther matter till these victims wakes up. I've got inter this riot, an' I'm goin' ter look arter me own preshus health. I don't want 'em ter fool 'bout me. Eh?"

His hands shot out as he spoke, and covered the two men he had knocked down. The three were beginning to come to their senses.

"Nary nonsense, nohow. Elevate yer extremities an' sashay out, takin' yer pard with yer. Bunco sez fair play; an' we don't want no more foolishness. When yer uncle Fuller talks he means murder from ther go."

Pocket Pete got more sternness into his tones than any one there had supposed them capable of; but it was hardly needed. The men seemed well enough satisfied to get away—at least until they could repair damages—without further question.

They led off their wounded comrade, leaving One-Armed Dave to enjoy his honors as a mighty chief, and Pocket Pete to shine as a star of little less magnitude.

Granger did not remain at The Lair very long, and went striding away boldly and alone.

"It's a dog-gone pity," suggested one of the gossipers, after he had left, "that him an' that Bossard can't come tergether. Ef they're both goin' across ter Black Dam I'll bet ther'll be some fun thar, an' I wouldn't stop much ter travel 'long jest ter see it."

"Right you are; an' I'll go," responded Pocket Pete, heartily. "I did think I'd tarry at Bunco;

but when ther's fun afloat I foller ther tide. But I don't sabbe ther bottom facts ov ther' comin' yit, an' all I kin see is that some ov yer bad men hain't ez good ter hold on ez they are ter ketch hold. Ther' were a thunderin' lot ov row ter pan out no stiff. Now, I'm ready fur a look at ther tiger, an' I've money ez sez I kin hold ther beast level, an' mebbe come out a leetle ahead."

And he jingled the coin in his pocket as he steered his course into the other room.

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER SOME DAYS.

THADDEUS ROUSVELDT was alone and in trouble; and the worst of it was that he could not help but find that it served him right, for about a dozen reasons, chief of which was, that he had no business to be there.

He sat disconsolately on a huge boulder, and stared along the mountain-side, in utter loneliness and desolation.

"What in heaven's name ever possessed me, ah, to come to this infernal country, anyhow? There was room enough, ah, in New York for all the wild goose chase a man *ought* to want; and, ah, a decent jumping-off place when one got tired. Am I to be starved, ah, or devoured? This is, ah, *dreadful*; and no one to blame but myself, ah, for being placed, ah, in such an incomprehensible position. What did the ruffian mean? If he had robbed me I could have understood it; but to have him sail away, leaving me to sit here with my pocketbook safe, is more than I can understand. Why, ah, he was not even paid for his work. Is it possible, ah, that he could have been frightened?"

The young man's cogitations give a pretty simple explanation of the condition of affairs.

He was *en route* for Black Dam, and found that he had made a mistake in choosing a side from which to approach it, as the stage which he expected to meet did not make its trip until the next day, thus leaving him for twenty-four hours in a dull little mining-camp where he had no business, when it seemed very important that he should move ahead.

Desperate at the very idea he had accepted the opportunity to ride across the mountains in company with Sierra Sam, a gentleman of no particular character, but who, with his horse-flesh, happened to be available.

And this treacherous guide had taken the opportunity, when Rousveldt dismounted to stretch his limbs, to ride away and leave him in the wildest of regions. He had stumbled on for some distance, thinking it might be a practical joke of some kind, but finally the truth that he was deserted became too plain to be doubted, and he seated himself on the boulder, to rest his limbs and gather his thoughts.

To remain there was, of course, not to be thought of; to turn back after having accomplished so much of the distance was not only distasteful but dangerous; while to go ahead without a guide was impossible. He wished now that he had confided less in the knowledge of Sierra Sam, and had got from some one else a more exact description of the windings of the mountain trails.

Thought only added to the gloominess of the outlook. It is hard to guess upon what he would have decided if he had not been suddenly compelled to act. While he communed with himself he heard the noise of approaching hoofs.

At first he was thrilled by the hope that it was Sierra Sam returning. If he had not profited by his late lesson he might have remained in that belief until it was too late.

His ear had gained in sharpness, and the sounds were not altogether familiar. Something like a panic seized him, and without stopping to consider, he darted away to the other side of the dim trail, and scrambling up the steep acclivity that led in that direction, he was almost immediately lost to sight under the cover of the sheltering shrubbery ready to receive him.

He did not go far before he was halted by the nature of the ground, and trusting to the denseness of the concealing foliage, he turned, and bending toward the spot he had just left, listened eagerly.

There could be no mistake about it then. At least half a dozen horsemen were passing below, riding cautiously, and talking in a low tone.

They seemed in a good-humor, too.

"There's sich a thing ez playin' it too fine, an' that's what ther wuthless gerloot are a-doin'. Who wants *him*? Ef he gallops all ther way inter Black Dam an' tells his story I'm afeard his stock'll drop 'way below par. Durned ef I'd like ter make myself out such a coward, even if I was one."

"Don't fret yerself 'bout Sierra Sam, with yer dishwater lingo. He's rascal enough ter see his way clear, an' too lazy to go a mile furdur than he bez to. Jest you keep yer mouths shut an' look out fur our man. Ef he hears us comin' he may stick his head in a hole somewhar's an' ther deuce an' all won't find him. These ijecots are ther dickens fur luck, an' it won't do ter be lettin' off too much noise till ther other part ov ther job are finished."

"Suthin' in that—reckon we'd better dry up. We orter strike him somewhar 'round ther next bend."

The gang passed on out of hearing, and Rousveldt no longer had the shadow of a doubt. There was a plot of some kind against him, and the sooner he got out of that region the safer, though which way to turn was a puzzling question. When it was found that he was no longer near the spot where the treacherous guide had left him, no doubt they would begin to trail him in earnest, and soon find his traces. Without the least plan or hope he turned and made the best of his way from the spot.

He no longer sought to climb the mountain-side, but circled away, gradually diverging from the trail. As he reached more level ground beyond hearing distance from the spot lately left, he strode along with a freer step, looking around from side to side both to mark his course, and to discover in advance any hiding-place that might be available if suddenly needed.

Nothing was heard from the men behind. There was but little danger that they could follow him on horseback, and he began to hope that he would get sufficient start to avoid being overtaken if they attempted it on foot. He grew fuller of this hope as the moments passed; and finally, losing his dread of the men, began to understand more fully the other dangers of his position.

As he came out into an opening that overlooked a clear little pocket in the mountain-side he threw himself upon the ground to rest.

"Ah, really, I believe I have avoided the desperadoes; but, ah, I am not sure but that I have become involved in something worse. How horribly lonely, ah! I have read of men wandering in such wildernesses until, ah, they starved to death. If I don't meet some one, ah, that can set me on the right track how can I ever escape, ah?"

Mr. Rousveldt had a peculiarity in his pronunciation that made him, the moment he began to speak, seem the more ridiculously out of place. At irregular intervals he drew in his breath in a forcible way that resembled the exclamation "ah!" though if the word was written upside down it might better illustrate its force.

The latter part of the soliloquy had been uttered aloud, and in his most despairing tone. He was troubled enough; but any one hearing him would have imagined him more thoroughly demoralized than he really was.

At any rate he was shocked to hear behind him a short laugh.

He sprang to his feet in an instant, his hand thrust into the bosom of his vest. Though it had a peculiar sound there was no mistaking that laugh. It came from the lips of a woman.

If instinct, or a marvelously acute judgment in such matters, went for anything, it was, moreover, from the lips of a young and handsome one. And yet his hand was on a weapon as he turned around and confronted the intruder. In such a region as that a woman who could laugh might very well be dangerous.

He had made no mistake, the person upon whom his eyes fell was of the feminine sex; even though she was so little beyond being a child that it seemed hard to call her a woman. She was a girl, certainly not beyond eighteen years of age, neatly dressed, though after a fashion well suited to the wilderness in which she stood. In her hands she held a light repeating rifle, while around her trim waist was a belt which supported a cartridge-box, a knife, and a revolver. Her hair was dark, to match her sparkling eyes; her face, though naturally dark, and still further tinged by sun and wind, had a healthy bloom upon it, and her features were regular, not to say beautiful.

She stood there with a smile on her ripe, red lips, watching him with an amused curiosity, her face utterly void of any expression that could be called the semblance of fear.

"In the name of all creation, ah, who are you?" asked Rousveldt, surprised in spite of himself.

A gleam of understanding lit up the face; yet there was no distinct answer. One little hand was raised, the little fingers nimbly twisting and turning, while not a sound issued from her mouth.

Then, as if suddenly remembering herself, she laid a finger on her lips in a significant gesture.

"Good heavens, ah!" exclaimed Rousveldt.

"The young woman is dumb!"

And then away behind him he heard in the distance sounds that told that the ruffians had found his trail at last.

CHAPTER VIII. BELEAGUERED.

At the double discovery Rousveldt turned over in his mind the faint remembrances of an almost forgotten art, and then slowly spelled out the words:

"On my way. Guide treacherous. Left me. Outlaws on track. Can you—"

He stopped suddenly. It had occurred to him that if there were outlaws on his trail this young lady might number them among her friends, and would take her measures accordingly.

She saw the shadow, and her own face flushed at his thought.

"Trust me," she answered, in the language of

the mutes. "Cactus Fork is near. I can guide you. Come."

Of course she had not heard the distant sounds of pursuit, and could not understand, as he did, the immediate nature of his danger.

"Hurry," was his answer. "They are close." Then he pointed in the direction of whence he had come.

She understood better now. Glancing backward she nodded; made a gesture that meant he should not fear, but follow, and then stepped lightly away.

He was reassured. If Cactus Fork was near the villains who, he had reason to believe, were after him, would not be so bold; and if they did not soon come upon him he might elude them altogether. What was his surprise to see, before he had taken a score of steps, a little cabin, not far away, let into the side of the mountain. So well was the building concealed from view that he might have passed by it at the distance of a few yards without seeing it.

The girl pointed to the low, stoutly-built cabin, tapped the stock of her rifle, pointed back, and shook her head. She evidently meant that here was a safe place of refuge—one that might not be found, and could certainly be defended.

He thought so himself if the place was properly garrisoned; but he had never in his life seen a shot fired in anger, and he had even less confidence in the young lady than himself. She hardly looked as though it was possible for her to be violent.

A few moments brought them to the threshold. Then the stout door flew open, and an old woman stood in the frame. She looked as though she might be a witch, and to add to the outlandishness of the picture a curious-looking face appeared at her knee—which Rousveldt presently recognized as belonging to a goat. Woman and animal alike barred his entrance, while the girl rapidly explained who the new-comer was.

"Eh? Found you on the mountain, did she, and brought you home to her nest? Better look for a mount' in lion. Go away! Go away!"

"Pardon me for seeming to dispute your advice; but, really, ah, that is just what I want to do, if some one will only show me which way and how, ah. The young lady has explained briefly, I judge; and I want to add a few words. My name is Rousveldt. I am from New York city, and I am, or was, trying to find my way to Black Dam, where I expect to find a friend."

"Ha, ha, ha! Hoo, hoo, hoo!" laughed the old woman. "Do you think you can deceive me? Lies, lies, all a pack of lies. What does a young man like you want at Black Dam? and if it is there you are going, what are you doing here? You came to find the girl. Look out for yourself, though, if harm happens to her. Danny Harcourt is a bad man. She is the apple of his eye, and woe to the one that harms her."

"I am not going to harm her, but while you are wasting time with me here the men who have driven me from the trail, after my guide deserted me, will find us here. Even if I knew the road I could not leave two women alone and unprotected, unless I was certain they would come to no harm. If you are wise you will not remain. Lead the way, and find a refuge until the present danger is over."

"Well to talk, but you cannot fool Hannah. Back! We are ready for such wolves."

The eyes of the old woman glittered more savagely, she made a quick movement, and for the first time in his life Thaddeus Rousveldt found himself looking into the muzzle of a cocked revolver.

The young girl showed more alarm than he.

With a sweep of her hand she threw up the barrel, and then, seizing Hannah by both wrists, with a sudden effort forced her back into the house.

Although recognizing his own danger, Rousveldt could not decide to leave the girl, whose evident wish to serve him could not well be mistaken. And, moreover, as he did not know which way to turn, he might be expected to wait until he was certain that there was no chance for aid from them.

Meantime, he looked anxiously up the mountain-side, while the moments seemed to be wonderfully lengthened. In reality, only a few of them had passed when old Hannah came to the door, and reaching out one claw-like hand, drew him in.

"I must believe the girl whether I want to or not; and I have promised to aid you. Come! Not half a dozen men can force their way in here, if we are ready to keep them out."

She closed and barred the door as she spoke, and Thaddeus Rousveldt saw that he was in a little fort, provided with weapons and loop-holes, and that the garrison had no fears about its defense.

He wished he could feel their confidence, and was surprised to notice that his uneasiness was more on their account than on his own. Even while he was looking around, he heard a shout from without.

"Hello, thar, house ahoy! What in blazes d'yer mean thar? Pull in yer gun an' listen ter reason!"

Old Hannah had been on the alert, and the

instant that a little squad of rough men appeared, she had thrust the barrel of a carbine through one of the loop-holes that commanded the ground in front of the cabin.

"Go away!" screamed back the old woman. "If you are wise you won't bother us. This is Danny Harcourt's claim, and this is his shanty. If he catches you fooling 'round it, you'll think you've got hold of the sharp end of a streak of lightning. We're looking for him back about now."

"Don't fool yourself," retorted one of the men. "He's away down toward Bunco, an' ef he ain't passed in his checks yet, it's only because ther game ain't quite played out. You'll never see him ag'in; an' we're app'inted by law ter settle up his affairs an' minister on his goods. So open that door, afore we bu'st it an' make things a heap sight wuss!"

"Look around you," retorted Hannah, "and you'll see a line on the ground. The first man that steps over it, dies! There are three of us here that can shoot straight, and we would have opened on you already if we hadn't hated to shed even such cowardly blood as yours. It's the last warning. Go away!"

"Jest a minnit. We were only jokin' what we said, an' I'll give it to yer squar' this time. We're after a young hoss-thief—a man what stole two bronchos from Sierra Sam. We know he come this way, an' we know he's in thar. Turn him loose whar we kin git at him, and I sw'ar we'll go 'way with him, an' leave yer alone."

"No horse-thief is there here; and if there was, he would be too good to give up to such men as you. I have nothing more to say. If you come over that line, we'll kill you; and if you fool around the other side of it, Danny Harcourt, when he comes, will take you in."

Old Hannah's voice was raised to a high pitch, her words darting out with the very flame of slaughter, while her hands never quivered, and there was the ring of truth in what she said that made the men look at each other in a hesitating sort of way.

They had their reasons for not wishing to come to an actual engagement with fire-arms; and yet this defender of the fort seemed to be of the kind that could be taken in no other way. Having counted on an easy victory they were evidently at a loss how to proceed.

Finally the leader waved the rest still further back, and turned again toward the cabin.

"That's all fol-de-rol. Ef Danny Harcourt, ez you call him, wants ter drop inter a pot ov p'izen, now's his chance. I think ye'r lyin', but I ain't takin' no reesks; an' yer made a big mistake when yer given us warnin'. We'll jest sit down hyer an' wait. We kin afford it. Ef he kims we'll take him in frum behind the bushes so quick he'll never know what hit him. Ef he's down Bunco-ways, ez we b'leve, it'll show ye'r lyin', an' 'long 'bout dark you kin look out further fun ter begin in earnest. You can't see ter hit a horse, an' we'll be right in town. Oh-h-h!"

He ceased speaking suddenly, a howl mingling with his last words, and the howl was almost lost in the roar of a shot-gun. From some point not very far away, the rear center of his person had been filled with a charge of small shot, that just found space enough to thoroughly scatter.

Over and over he tumbled, in a succession of somersets, that finally took him out of sight of the loop-hole from which Hannah had been holding her parley.

The sudden change of front was too much for his companions, who were safe'y out of range. They burst into a yell of laughter, which lost them a precious minute. When they thought to look around to see the direction from which the shot had come they were too late. It was most certainly not from the cabin. Was Harcourt at hand?

CHAPTER IX.

FROM ONE DANGER TO ANOTHER.

THE shot puzzled Rousveldt himself, for a moment. Then the actions of the girl enlightened him.

Somewhere there was a spring-gun set, that covered the line on which the outlaw had stood; and a touch on a string that led into the cabin had discharged it. That was the explanation of the mystery, though of course it was not understood by those outside, who took to cover the moment after, recovering from their amusement, they recognized the possible danger.

"The cowards!" exclaimed old Hannah. "If Dan Harcourt did come they would run like sheep."

"Yet they seem to have had an eye on this place and its owner, ah; and it appears to me that perhaps they would have approached it, even, ah, if I had not been so unfortunate as to have led them toward it."

The suggestion appeared to strike the old woman forcibly. She knit her brows, and her fingers worked nervously as she clutched the stock of the carbine which she held to her shoulder, and from time to time gave furtive glances at the young girl.

"They know too much, they know too much," she muttered. "In the dark they can force their way in; and then, it would be an awful risk for her."

"Right you are, ah, and I wonder you did not think of such a danger before. This, ah, is no place for a young lady. If I could see my way to getting away from here, which, ah, I confess I do not, I could not go and leave her in such peril. You must count me as one of the garrison, ah, and issue your orders for the defense. I confess, ah, that I have had no experience in such work, but, ah, I think with that carbine I could hit a man as far off as most."

He was quite impressive, the more so as he could speak without fear of exciting any greater alarm in the mind of the girl for whom he was so solicitous. Her attention was now occupied with what was going on outside, and would not of course be diverted by anything he might say. Hannah quietly turned from the wall, leaving the carbine propped in the loop-hole.

"I don't want to trust you; but I must. This is no place for us now that those thieves have come to stay. It is only a couple of miles to the Fork, though the road is rough. We must hold them out until it is dark, and then if they do not press us at once we may get away unseen, and leave the cabin to them. There is not much of value here. If they destroy it, it will be the better. As you say, this is no place for her to live."

The old woman was strangely intelligent for one amidst such surroundings; and now that she had accepted the truth of his story treated Rousveldt as an ally rather than as a stranger. His coming had, at the first, seemed to excite her far more than that of the outlaws, though the latter were the more to be dreaded.

After that shot the men kept carefully out of sight.

There was wisdom in so doing. Though at first it looked so much like murder there is no doubt the little garrison would have soon been willing to shoot wherever they saw a man in range; and while this might have precipitated an assault it would, at the same time, have lessened the number of their assailants.

The quiet seemed unnatural; and Rousveldt peered about him uneasily, looking first from one loop-hole and then from another.

The cabin had evidently been located with an eye to defense, sitting right under an overhanging precipice, which protected it from the rear, and partially on two sides. The three inmates could keep watch, and avoid surprise. At least, so it seemed until Rousveldt was startled by a smart thump on the low roof. As he was staring out at the time, he saw a small stone drop to the ground, and had no doubt but that it had caused the noise. Where had it come from?

The fact was that while waiting the men were also experimenting, and having climbed to the low peak above the house had dropped the stone, which landed upon the corner of the roof that was barely visible from their position.

Again there was silence; but the outlaws were at work. The result of their experiment had given them an idea, which they proceeded to carry out. A huge boulder, weighing several hundred pounds was carefully knotted with a stout lariat, and then swung over the sharp edge of the overhanging cliff. With a pole one man rocked this out and in, while two held on to the rope. Then suddenly the lariat was cut, the two went stumbling back, and the rock crashed downward through the roof of the cabin below.

A foot or two further to the side and it might have proved fatal. As it was, Thaddeus Rousveldt, by a quick movement drew the girl toward him, barely escaping the falling timbers. Then they looked at each other, somewhat appalled as the great rock mashed into the floor in front of them, while splinters and timbers fell on and around them.

Old Hannah gave a great cry and sprang toward them, pulling them still further back, and then anxiously looking into the face of the girl.

There were traces of agitation there, but no signs of pain. By almost a miracle no harm had been done.

Rage relieved her anxiety. She caught up a carbine and glanced upward through the opening that had been made in the roof; then fired a quick shot.

The report was echoed by a cry from above, and shots and shouts from without. The men on guard below taking for granted that the inmates were in confusion, had crept nearer, ready for a dash when they saw an opening. The charge of shot received by the spokesman was a bad investment. Before that the intention seemed to be to capture without harm being done, now, to kill without risk.

Rousveldt looked at the rock, and seeing the remnant of rope around it at once fathomed the way the game was being played.

"It appears to me, ah, that it will only be a question of time. We can get back out of range, ah, I think; but they can batter away the front part of the house, and leave us defenseless, ah."

"You saved her life, young man; and, I believe, would fight for her. If we cannot stay here we can break through. You and I could scatter a dozen such hounds; but a chance shot might reach Helen. It is that I am afraid of. Yet we may have to risk it. Be ready."

She darted toward a loop-hole, then, it seemed to her that she caught sight of a swiftly-moving shadow.

Hannah was a woman, and an old woman, but her words had been more than mere braggadocio. She fired a snap-shot, which was answered by a cry of pain.

"That will hold them off for a little," she said, hastily. "Be ready to follow me closely. They will batter the walls from above before they make any open effort in front."

Then she spoke with her fingers to the girl Helen, and at an answering nod sprang to a rear corner of the cabin and tore away a curtain.

Rousveldt had rather suspected that there was some interior place of refuge, some cellar or burrow in the rocks, where they might be out of reach of the rain of bowlders, but he did not feel like falling back to it until the last moment. With no one in front it would not be long until the rush would come, and all the advantages of the first line of defenses be lost. He hesitated to follow.

"You go; that is well enough, ah! But leave the way open and I will follow, ah, when I have to."

"No. Go now. Follow Helen and I will bring up the rear. It is no longer safe here. We are on the way now to Cactus Fork."

To emphasize her words another rock came crashing through the roof. The cabin was growing more and more untenable. Hannah caught him by the shoulder and thrust him into the narrow opening through which the girl had already disappeared, and then, following herself, dropped the curtain behind her.

He saw it was no use to struggle against her wishes, and allowed himself to be guided along what seemed to be a narrow passageway through the rock.

Around him the darkness was intense; but the underground journey did not last long. Helen had hastened on in advance, and had opened the way to the outer world. Rousveldt saw a glimmer of light ahead and felt that the trying moment had come, even before Hannah whispered in his ear:

"Be silent. All was planned the best that it could be, yet there is a moment or two of danger. If they do not see us while we are reaching cover they can batter away till the walls fall. We will be half-way to Cactus Fork."

Abreast the three stole out, crouching low, and heading for a green clump that marked the entrance to the descent to the gulch that led away toward the Fork. By the side of Helen frolicked the goat, which had silently followed. At some little distance they heard scattering shots, evidently aimed at the tenantless cabin.

The danger of being seen appeared to be well-nigh passed. Old Hannah turned and shook her fist in the direction of the sounds. No doubt it was hard to go; but better was it to leave the house behind to be ruined than to remain for slaughter.

Yet, as she turned, a man who had been crouching just below the crown of the bank, raised up, a revolver in either hand, exclaiming:

"Halt there, my pretties. I've got two of yer sure an' an even thing on the third. Hands up er chaw lead."

One pistol covered Thaddeus Rousveldt, while the other was aimed full at old Hannah, and the ring in his voice meant shoot.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNACCOUNTABLE DISAPPEARANCE.

THE sudden appearance of the man in their front was a complete surprise, since they had not looked for danger in that direction. To be sure he only held the drop on two, but a motion of the third meant certain death to them. He had in reality been placed there to guard the approach from the direction of Cactus Fork, and it was almost a chance, and only when they were quite near, that he noted the coming of the fugitives, who stopped short at his order, the two because they recognized the danger, and Helen because the others did.

"That's right, pretties," he continued. "I have you foul; don't you try to move—"

And then his speech was cut short with marvelous suddenness, his words ending in a bubbling grunt, that was followed by the noise of a scrambling fall.

The goat had no hands to put up, and had not been included in his calculations, since the sentinel had not even seen it as he raised up. Now, the animal whirled past its mistress, and launched itself, head down, straight at the stomach of the outlaw.

Without loss of a moment Rousveldt followed, and dropped with his knees upon the body of the prostrate man, at the same time clutching his throat with a grip that was by no means tender.

Not another sound was made, and the way the fingers of the young man sunk into the yielding flesh it looked as though the fellow would soon be past making any.

"Quick," whispered Thaddeus. "We must dispose of him, without his giving the alarm. Have you a cord? I do not wish to kill him, though death is what they all deserve."

"Yes; but drag him down further. We must know more of this. He shall tell or die."

Hannah flourished a pistol as she spoke, and looked more dangerous than half a dozen men, as she hissed her words out in a bitter whisper.

The way downward was, for some little distance, quite precipitous. When they had gagged the half-unconscious man, and knotted his wrists together stoutly, it was no great trouble to drag him along.

When they had reached a fair offing Rousveldt halted.

"Now, my man, ah, I don't know much about the ways of the West, ah, but I do know a good deal about my own, ah. And I swear if we don't have the truth out of you I'll cut your worthless throat, ah, as I have a perfect right to do. I want to know who is at the bottom of this game, and what, ah, it is all about."

The man answered sullenly, but in the same low tone adopted by his questioner.

"An' when you've pumped the well dry what yer goin' ter do? Mebbe you'll put a pill in for good-luck an' let me lay hyer ter rot."

"The truth, and I leave you here unharmed, so bound that you can give no alarm, but ready for your friends to find when, they come this way. A falsehood, and they stumble across your corpse. Choose quick; there is no time for parley."

"Then truth it is, boss; but ef yer war more ov a tough, an' less ov a tenderfoot, blaned ef I'd trust yer a bit. You ain't ther kind ter give me away, an' you'll see that ther cabker keeps to ther barg'in. Danny Harcourt ain't ther man ter want on yer track, an' ez ther game seems ter hev slipped up I kinder want him ter stay in ther dark 'bout me, er ther rest mou't hear it an' then I'd find it hot on both sides."

"Less talk and more timber," interrupted Rousveldt. "If, ah, we are discovered by your friends I'll kill you, if I die for it."

"Hyar yer hev it. Ther captain—"

"What captain?" interrupted Rousveldt.

"Captain Snow—he jest sent orders ter lay fur you, an' scoop yer in when yer him sailin' along this-a-ways with that durned blow-house, Sierra Sam. An' ez fur ther gal, we war ter take her too, ef it war convenient—which it seemed ter be. Ef he'd bin thar I reckon ther job would 'a' bin a heap better done."

"And what, ah, were we to be taken for?"

"Fur coin. They reckoned you could shovel out a power ov it ter save yer neck. Now yer hed better paddle on. I hear 'em at work, an' when they find you've jumped ther ranch it won't be long afore they scatter round hyer."

"One more question. How, ah, did this Captain Snow know that I was coming?"

"How does he know everything? That yer must ask him; but I reckon some one sent him word."

Rousveldt gave a quick glance at old Hannah, who shook her head. She had nothing more to ask.

"You answered, ah, the questions, and they are not, ah, very hard. I will be as good as my word."

Quickly the gag was replaced, and leaving the man to his fate they ran on down the gulch. The conversation had only delayed them a few moments.

Luck was in their favor and there were no startling surprises. Away behind them arose a roar as the outlaws, encouraged at the lack of resistance, charged in with a chorus of shouts. With ordinary good fortune the fugitives would have a mile the start before Captain Snow's men could discover how completely they had been fooled.

"But what, ah, if they should follow us to Cactus Fork?"

Half an hour later Thaddeus Rousveldt asked that question as they stood at the edge of the brisk mining-camp for which they had aimed.

"So they will, mo t likely," answered Hannah, "but if we keep out of their way they will not dare to attack us. If you know what is good, however, you will not allow any one the chance to pick a quarrel with you, nor will you leave the hotel after dark. These men are very desperate; and are ten times more bitter when they have been fooled as they were by us. They would think nothing of shooting you down in the street. You would be wise if you got out of the range of their power as soon as possible."

The young man shrugged his shoulders and made no more inquiries of that kind. He was not a coward, and he hardly liked the tone in which the advice was given. He simply determined to keep his tongue still, and look after the interests of the girl until something or other was decided in regard to her future.

It was not far off of sundown when they entered the town, and they attracted no attention as they quietly made their way toward "The Pilgrim's Pride," the best imitation of a hotel that the place afforded.

Jimmy Lyng, the landlord, was a model of good sense. If he scented a mystery he asked no questions, when once satisfied that the strange young gentleman was able to pay for his accommodations. Hannah and her charge appeared to be not altogether strangers, since he greeted them after the manner of one who had at least

seen them before. He did not look suspicious even when, though they had arrived together they separately arranged for their accommodations. They had their suppers, of which they stood in need, and Rousveldt took occasion to remark:

"You do not intend, ah, to make any complaint about the treatment you have received?"

"Not until Harcourt comes. He will know what to do, and if he starts on their trail they will wish they had left his dove-cote alone."

"Ah, a bad man, no doubt. If, ah, that is your intention, I will be as silent also. And, ah, if I can be of any use to you or the young lady, I, and, ah, my pocketbook are at your service."

"No, thanks, sir. We can care for ourselves; and before it is all over you will find that it will be you that will need help. If you will take an old woman's advice, go back. Whatever has brought you here you will fail; and the next time you need them you may find no friends to help you."

"Thank you, ah, old lady, but I must go my way. Perhaps by morning you will be in a better humor with me, ah. Good-night."

He bowed to both and left them. He did not care for the old woman, and she did not mean to allow him to have anything to say to the young one; yet he intended to have a few words of advice to say in the morning, on his part.

But when morning came they were left unsaid, since both Hannah and her charge had disappeared without leaving any sign, and even Billy was no longer to be seen.

CHAPTER XI.

STAGE GOSSIP.

It was not quite ten days since Pocket Pete had taken a hand at the various circuses that marked his arrival in the Bunco district. The passengers bound for Black Dam had dined, and were now waiting on the porch at Billy Garrett's, the station where they changed for Black Dam.

The stage from Rat Trap was already nearly an hour late, and the five or six passengers that had been left from the through coach for the gulch began to manifest their impatience. Their present quarters were not so uncomfortable, but it was now pretty certain that they would be away behind time in reaching their destination.

Of the four inside and two outside the most important was Miss Belle Rand, a crisp, sparkling brunette, with pouting lips, curling, brown hair, a neat figure, and a fancy for having her own way.

Solon Rand, her father, looked as though he might be a solid man where he came from, was on the further side of fifty, and had a deliberate, not to say pompous, style of utterance, that indicated a very good opinion of himself, though he spoke but seldom.

Then there was Judge Bailey Brandt, of Black Dam, a gentleman well known along the line of the road, and an authority at home, where he was, without doubt, the most influential man in the place. A mine-owner, a legal adviser, a public-spirited and prosperous man, people liked him all the better for his success; while the few that knew the one cross he had to carry sympathized with him most thoroughly. Affluence had not spoiled him, and though his eyes peered out keenly through the glasses of his gold-rimmed spectacles, and his face had the appearance of that of a sharp business man, there was nothing offish about him. The boys all knew that he could be hail-fellow-well-met upon occasion, and that what he did not know about the value of an ace full at bluff was hardly worth the investigating.

The fourth of the insiders has already been described, being none other than Dave Granger, who had drifted across from Bunco to Rat Trap, and was now on his way to Black Dam.

Of the two outsiders one is already known to the reader, and the other was much of a kind. Brawny, burly-looking toughs they, with an arsenal of guns, a chorus of oaths, and an apparently unlimited capacity for mountain dew.

Pocket Pete and Dan White were the names they answered to where they were known; and they looked as though they would hardly call on a camp without letting themselves be heard of.

The two were only casual acquaintances, having met for the first time on the stage, and for some little while after dinner they stood by themselves, exchanging experiences.

"So that's Judge Brandt, of Black Dam," muttered Pete, at length. "Yer wouldn't hardly think it, ter look at him, an' then at his brother."

"Eh? Yer know his brother, does yer? What does he look like? I've heard on him, but he don't show up 'round hyaraways much. An' they say all ther jedge are afeard on is that same day he'll come. Sport on wheels, is he?"

"Kinder, sorter. I didn't hev much ov a chance ter size him up, but I heard him drop, permiskis like, suthing 'bout his brother, ther jedge at Black Dam. Fur my use ther other's ther best ov ther two, but mebbe ther jedge has sand stowed away atween decks ez we don't know nothin' about till ther time kims. What's he good fur?"

"Hold yer hush!" said White, a little roughly,

as he noted that Pocket Pete's voice had risen so that there was a possibility of his free-and-easy criticisms being overheard. "Ther man that picks him up fur half-baked 'll git hold ov a mighty hot pertater. When he does pull he's certain death. He booted me once, jest lifted me a rod, fur hev'n my nose in his matters, an' I don't want ter hev him try it ag'in. Somebody mou't git hurt—even if it war me."

And Dan White grinned, as he delivered his confession, in a way that showed that he suspected it would be he that would be hurt in such an event.

"Oh, yer're soft. He's a man an' yer're another; can't you hold yer own till grass grows? Ef not, put yer nose in yer pocket an' salt it down. I think I'll go ter head-quarters, ef that's the kind ov a lodge-pole you be."

White looked at his companion with something of the curiosity one feels when viewing a man moving to execution, but did not attempt to stop him as he strolled carelessly over toward the more aristocratic section of the passengers.

There happened to be a lull in the desultory conversation that had been going on, and the judge looked up with a quick, sharp glance, and then turned away his face.

"I say, jedge, I struck a man down at Bunco, thet kerried ther handle ov Brandt, an' he done it up ter nature. A reg'ler high-heeled snoligoster he war, an' a sport frum Sharpville, with a lead tooth an' a pill-box in each pocket. You hain't lost him outen your family, hev you?"

"How?"

The judge turned again with a quick start, and staring up at his interlocutor with an angry frown as he tossed at him the one word. Yet a keen observer might have noted an uncomfortable look on Bailey Brandt's face. Something of fear or shame mixed in with the anger in his glance.

"Oh, don't shoot it off that way. I ain't sayin' anything ag'in him, er you, be I? He's a high-toned gentleman, an' I only thort I'd let yer know thet if yer hed missed him fur any length ov time he war thar 'live an kickin' an' soon a-comin' this way. He's a hull team, you bet, with three brindle dogs under ther wagon."

"Interesting information that is," the judge answered, with a sneer in his tone; but more mildly than one would have expected. "Do I look like a man that would want to take stock in three brindle bull-dogs—or any other number?"

"Can't say thet you do," Pocket Pete responded, not at all moved; "but I thort mebbe you'd like ter know yer brother were all right, up ter ther present time—an' he were in trouble when I first seen him, you jist bet. A gang mounted him, a hull gang; but he jest put his hands up an' waltzed in, an' he went through that crowd like ther bob-tail bull through the high grass in fly time, ez yer read about. After that he hed more friends than yer c'uld deal a card, one around an' a deck up yer sleeve—an' ef sich a brother don't do yer proud he's good enuf fur me, an' I'll reetire."

Without waiting to see whether he was to get thanks, or something else, for his information Pocket Pete wheeled and slouched back to his former position, and fell to inspecting the trail that led away toward Rat Trap.

Bailey Brandt made no motion to detain him, but turned toward his companions with a sigh of relief.

"It's the skeleton in my closet," he said, with an air of resignation, "though such as he cannot appreciate it."

"I can understand how our friend, the tough yonder, feels in the matter," interposed Granger with the suspicion of a smile. "I did not see the fracas, but I was in Bunco at the time it occurred, and really it was a most wonderful fight for one man to make against odds, without appealing to any but nature's weapons. It did me good just to hear it."

"But what is it all about?" asked Miss Rand, briskly. "I do not understand, and am interested to learn. I thought out here all men were free and equal, and all that, you know."

"So they are, Miss Rand, if they try to be; but there is no place on this broad footstool where a man can give away his advantages more quickly, or a broader difference can be developed. And the worst of it is that we are all so prejudiced that we cannot see it until some peculiarity of our own case grinds it home."

"That is plain speaking, Mr. Brandt," chattered the young lady. "I thought there were some drawbacks to your wonderful civilization—that to me seems to have gone clear around the globe and got back to the tail end of barbarism. I don't mean anything to hurt your feelings, though. Do excuse me if I have done it?"

Miss Belle hastened to beg pardon as she saw a flush creep over the face of the judge, and she was really afraid that she had given some offense, but his answer reassured her.

"I don't think frankness can hurt any one—not out here. That is our one virtue. I don't mind explaining in brief, though in one way the subject is distasteful enough. A very few words will do it. I have an unfortunate brother. He has the noblest of traits; but his head is set in what I consider the direction of down-hill. He

preceded me to the coast and when I met him I was shocked to know that he had given up legitimate business and degenerated into a sport. There was nothing to keep us together, so we drifted apart, and have only seen each other at long intervals. I am almost ashamed to own it, but as I have little influence with him I do not care that he should make his stamping-grounds near my preserves. Very unfriendly, when I profess to care for him so; but how can I help it?"

"Oh, then he must be one of your genteel desperadoes that we have heard about. How interesting! I should so like to have a peep at one! Tell me, is he handsome?"

First the judge looked over a little queerly at the man with one arm; then he pursed his lip, still hesitating.

"Don't you want to describe him?" broke in Miss Belle, with a suspicion that was rather creditable to her wits.

"Oh, yes!" laughed the judge. "It was only maiden modesty that made me falter. You see he is handsome; and yet they say he looks like me. I don't know where the resemblance is; but as brothers there could hardly help but be something in common about us. When we have more leisure I'll be happy to give you a complete description, but it looks as though our waiting was about ended. Evidently that man who introduced the subject sees something; and I hope that the something will turn out to be the stage. It is time to get ready."

He indicated Pocket Pete with his head, and Miss Rand saw that the tough was leaning forward, his eyes reaching a point in the turn which theirs, from their position, could not.

"Hyar she be!" exclaimed the pocket man. "Two hosses to ther wheels, an' a lame duck limpin' behind. Hyar's stamps ez sez they've bin held up, an' a handful more that ther's stiff's inside!"

And then the stage dragged slowly into sight.

CHAPTER XII.

BILL BURDOCK'S PATIENT.

THE condition of the team could make but little difference to the waiting travelers since horses were changed here, and if driver and vehicle were all right there would be no reason why they should not proceed. Nevertheless, as it was pretty certain that something serious had happened, there was at once a good deal of curiosity aroused, and besides the intending passengers there was quite a group collected as if by magic.

The driver was all right, anyway. He cracked his whip over his pair of discouraged steeds until they struck into a brisk trot; and then drew them up in front of the Stage Hotel with a flourish, both operations being greatly to the discomfort of the equine animal behind.

"What's ther matter, Bill?" rose the chorus as the Jehu tossed his lines to this side and the other, and slowly dismounted.

"Hev them hosses ter the hearse quick ez fire kin scorch a feather, an' git me suthin' I kin eat in my hand. I've got a sick man in thar I've sworn ter git through ter Black Dam by sundown, er tharabouts, an' I'll do it er knock a wheel off a-tryin'."

"But ther sick man didn't kill a boss, did he? What did yer strike? Tell us off-hand an' sharp on ther nail. Then me an' you an' ther rest ov ther crowd are goin' ter saturate at my expense, an' you kin be tellin' me ther fine p'int's ez we go along—fur I'm bound ter Black Dam myself, an' hope you'll whoop 'em up from the word jump."

"Thar ain't much ter tell," answered the driver, seeing no way to get around, and no path through the burly form of Pocket Pete, that was planted directly in front of him. "We struck a toll-gate in the middle of Deadman's Gulch; an' right after that ther thermometer riz, and ther weather got sultry. I pulled in ov course, an' held fingers up an' empty; but ther durned galoot inside stuck his head out an' began bangin' away. Then they raked the deck, killed a leader, pinched me, an' ez I thort, laid him cold. Ther queerest thing war, thet that ended it. When he give a grunt an' hooved back ther poppin' quit an' ther galoots cleared out, 'thout ever goin' fur his coin. I got him out, ez I thort, ready ter plant—allers kerries a shovel, it saves kerryin' deader weight sometimes—when I found ther were a leetle life left; an' that's whar I lost my time, a-foolin' with him. But I brung him 'round, an' he made me swear ter kerry him through ter Black Dam ter-night; an' by ther jumpin' Jehus, he's a-goin'. Now, let's histe, an' then them ez ain't aboard kin stay behind."

Bill Burdock's story was received as satisfactory, and though some lingered to peer in at the form huddled in one corner of the back seat the majority escorted him to the bar, when the proper amount of "h'istin'" was done.

Miss Belle heard the whole of this, and visibly shivered, looking from her father to the other two in real dismay.

"But what are we to do? Will we have to ride all the way to Black Dam with a dying man?"

"Probably he is not as badly hurt as Burdock asserted," remarked the judge, consolingly.

"And if he is he cannot take up the whole coach; and he won't be apt to crowd. If you think so you and your father take the inside, and this gentleman and I will try our fortunes on top. I know Burdock well, and if he has given his promise he will keep it whether it suits us or not. The horses are being put to, and we must decide quickly, for the driver will not wait, without an argument such as you would hardly care to listen to. And there is this consolation. We will probably reach Black Dam an hour or so sooner than we would otherwise have done. How shall it be?"

Mr. Rand had been saying very little, anyhow; and the judge seemed very natural in the role of chief counselor, but the young lady, turning suddenly upon Granger, found him listening with a cool smile.

"And what do you say?" she exclaimed. Her own way seemed to have come to a sudden bend, beyond which it was hard to see.

"The gentleman who has been speaking—ah—Judge Brandt—has very fairly explained the merits of the case. There is, I judge, nothing for you to do but go on, as proposed, or remain here until the next trip—which is just as likely to have its own unpleasantness. I might shoot Mr. Burdock and drive you in myself; but, as I understand, that would not be satisfactory either."

"Would you?"

She asked the question with mild enthusiasm. Certainly chivalry could offer no more.

"Certainly," he answered, in his cold way, "though that course had other objections."

"Well, then, I will go anyway at all that is most convenient. After that I cannot hesitate at anything you indorse."

"All aboard!"

Bill Burdock emerged from the "Stage Hotel," followed closely by Pocket Pete and Dan White; the luggage had been already safely stowed in the boot; the passengers scrambled hastily in or up; the whip cracked; and the horses went plunging forward.

How badly the man in the corner was wounded no one could tell. He was living, but he crouched there with his eyes closed, breathing heavily.

Miss Rand, to be as far away as possible, had dragged her father with her into the front seat, while Dave Granger and the judge occupied the middle one.

Granger had given a glance at the huddled form and then taken his seat without any sign of recognition. Though the least curious of mortals something impelled him to take another look, and as a slight jerk of the coach threw a little more of the face into view he exclaimed:

"Hello! It is Cool Cal, sure as a gun. What got you in such a scrape? Should have thought you would have known better. Are you badly hurt, old man?"

Barret slightly moved his head and turned his rather lusterless eyes toward the speaker, as he answered in a husky whisper:

"It was a cold deck, and it made me mad when I saw that they had set up a skin game on an old hand like me. I ain't hurt as bad as I might be, but I've got no breath to spare. I'll tell you all about it to-morrow. Let me alone. I must save it all now."

"All right, I don't intrude. Do the best you can, and if you need me say it out and you will find me around. You had better have come on with me than loafed around Bunco."

The supposition was that Burdock had done about all that was necessary for the wounded man, and it was certain that he could not be expected to take any part in the conversation the way the coach was bowling along. It was hard enough for the four closer together to make themselves audible, and the chatter languished, and finally ceased altogether, until they had come to a more level portion of the road.

Cal Barret seemed to be sleeping.

"Who is your friend?" asked Miss Rand, after a look in his direction. "You do not seem very much excited over the evil that has befallen him."

"Barret is his name—sometimes called Cool Cal by those who know him best. As he is no doubt listening I suppose you will not require a catalogue of his virtues and vices, which he possesses along with the rest of us. It is not very often that he gets off his base, and he has a wholesome disgust for men who do. He would never forgive me if I made a fuss over him; and to tell the truth I do not think that he needs it. He and the driver have arranged all that, and as Bill Burdock has had as much experience with gun-shot wounds as an army surgeon I am willing to leave the case in his hands for temporary repairs."

This was not exactly a rebuke, though Miss Belle felt it as such; and contrary to the habit of womankind made no protest. The party became more sedate than usual; though the twinkle that, spite of his spectacles, showed itself in the judge's eyes, announced that he enjoyed the rebuff the young lady had received after turning from him to the young man who was almost totally a stranger.

But meantime the stage was moving on, the miles were dropping behind, and Black Dam was getting nearer and nearer. Very much to

the surprise of most of the passengers, they wheeled into the main street of that classic burg but a short time after sundown, and drew up in front of the principal hotel, "The Colonnade," so little after the schedule hour that no one as yet had been alarmed.

By the time the Rands had scrambled out the outside passengers had made their way into the house, and the judge and Mr. Rand naturally made a movement to follow, but Miss Belle, who had not lost her interest in the wounded man, lingered, to see him leap carelessly out, and then, with a cry of pain, wrung from him in spite of himself, go surging into the arms of David Granger.

The plucky gambler had held out as well as flesh and blood could be expected to, and would fain have given no sign; but flesh and blood would not stand the strain, and he allowed himself to be piloted away.

"No use," whispered Granger. "You've got here. I think you would have done better if you had waited; but now that you are here you'll have to lay off a trip or two or you'll go over the board altogether."

"Oh, dry up, will you? What do you know about war? Get me in somewhere, so that I can have a mite of rest, and after that I'll be ready to blow my own horn."

"All right, all right. I'm only just advising. Here we are, and I think they'll give you as good as they have in the layout."

"If they don't I'll know the reason why. I'm a stranger in the town, but I guess they won't go back on me very bad. If they do that they'll find I can pick a trigger if I can't eat a ham. If you'll help me around to Burke's Emporium, wherever that is, after a while it'll be better than a month of preaching."

Cool Cal belied his name just then, for he was snappish enough to suggest a wildcat in a box, but Granger made no answer, only helping him in.

"Where is Burke's?" asked Miss Belle, of the judge, as he came to the door to see what had become of her.

"Burke's? What do you know about Burke? It's the worst gambling hole in town."

CHAPTER XIII.

PURE SAND.

"SAY cully, whar do you b'long?"

Pocket Pete was seated in Burke's "Emporium," not saying a word to any one, when the question was thrust at him. He took time to digest it, and then answered with deliberation:

"Well, pard, ef I don't b'long right hyar I'm ther wu'st lost kitten on ther footstool. I ain't no other place in view whar ter hang out, an' I opined I'd catch on hyar at Black Dam. I'm last frum Bunco, an' intermediut p'int."

"Good enuf! Thort yer might be some ov ther Short Ridge gang. They're comin' down to ther Dam ter-night; an' I guess there'll be water over ther breast an' ther wheel a-goin'."

"Short Ridge—who's them?"

"That's what we want ter know. Ther Ridge are whar they turn out ther oro by ther wagon-load—oh, they've got it down fine thar, stamps, smelters an' all them things—but ther men ther runs 'em, they're rustlers when they come down to town they make the mud fly. Ef they come its jest ez well to know aforehand which side ye'r goin' ter chip in on; an' I say, ef yer head's level you'll draw ter Black Dam fur a full hand."

"Mebbe; but big money goin' an' a strange crowd; then a feller's a fool ez don't hold the edge when he gits next the dealer. An' besides, onless I sot up a cirkiss ov me own I hadn't thort ov askin' fur no keards at all."

"Mighty safe game, that," sneered the citizen, "but leaves yer 'way out in ther cold. Yer can't win ef yer don't bet. Thar's a man thet'll chip both ways sooner then not git in. Looks ez though he war full ov nerve, an' a rooster to go."

Pocket Pete looked up and saw to his intense surprise that the individual indicated was none other than Cal Barret, who came gliding in without a sign of weakness in his walk, though his cheeks were pale, and his eyes had a feverish glitter.

He nodded at the man behind the bar, who gave a start at seeing him, and then threw himself behind a table, on which he placed several well-filled buckskin bags and a pack of cards.

His actions attracted considerable attention. He stood the scrutiny of the room, however, with perfect coolness until he had recovered his breath and then, in the hush his voice was heard.

"Gentlemen, I've got a plaster breast and back, and a lead shaft clean through, from one to the other. For that reason please touch me lightly, since I'm not very tough. I'm to meet a man here to-night when the clock strikes ten, and it's close on that time now. If he don't come I want you all to witness that I was here with money up and cards ready. Cal Barret never took water yet; and he don't begin with him."

"Who's the man?" sung out a coarse voice,

while the hush continued until the low, clear answer was given:

"Bart Brandt, the blackest-hearted thief that ever struck the mines."

"I guess you're a little off of your egg," began the voice again, that came from a group at the bar. "A whiter man than Jedge Brandt don't draw breath, and if you wer'n't a cripple some one would mount you on sight. Sing a leetle smaller, my festive friend, or the boys will break loose. We're all his friends here, and know him from the ground up."

"You think? I guess not. Judge Brandt may be good enough, but he's not the hairpin I'm after, but Black Bart, the solid man from 'way back."

"And Black Bart is here to speak for himself," echoed a clear and by no means unmelodious voice, as that individual pushed through the door, hustling several men that were in the way to this side and that.

Without another word he strode across the floor and flung himself into the vacant chair on the opposite side of the table to Cool Cal.

He was certainly a stranger, every one staring at him with curiosity; and yet there was something so familiar about him that each man on second glance felt certain that he had seen him before, though for the moment puzzled where to place him.

He was a strikingly handsome man—the handsomest beyond a doubt of all in the room. Yet there was a wickedness in his face that seemed to be its distinguishing characteristic, and it was almost impossible that one who had once seen it should ever forget it.

So the people of Black Dam were willing to admit, now that they had a second look at him; but there was an explanation at hand for the familiar appearance, and a low whisper began to go around:

"He's here at last. It is the judge's brother."

"So you got here?" he said, in a cold, sneering tone, as he turned and looked Barret full in the face. "They told me the hearse had brought in a half-made stiff, and I just thought it was you, scared out of your wits at the prospect of a tussle with a man. As you seem to have your nerve up at last we'd better get down to business. I haven't long to tarry."

"You lie in your teeth when you say I feared to meet you. You lie, and you know it. If you want a fight first and the fun afterward I'm agreeable."

"Oh, get your hands out of your pockets. You don't think I'm such a fool as not to know you have the drop. I don't know what you hate me so for, but I do know that you're crazy to kill me, and I came here to-night to give you a chance. They say you're square as a die, and I'm risking my brains on public opinion. When the game's over will be time enough to decide who is to climb the golden stairs. Hands on the board, now. If you've got a deck then throw around for deal, and may the best man win."

The new-comer hit the truth exactly when he spoke about the drop. At his appearance the hands of the other dove into his side-pockets with a threatening rapidity, and it was fair to guess that if his fierce words could have provoked an aggressive movement the chance would have been seized without hesitation.

"On the board they are. I'm off color to-night, and not giving away any chances. Maybe I'll last till the game is through, maybe I won't, anyway I'll do my level best. Here you have it—the lowest or an ace—and you have it, the first throw. You want it without gloves on; so do I. There's five hundred up, and when you cover it we'll lock horns."

That something lay beyond this bout at cards was easy to be seen, and as defiance and all was public, the public accepted the permission and crowded up to see what came of it, and to get a still closer view of the man who, until this evening, had been so much talked of—but so nearly a myth.

The money up was covered, Brandt dealt with the grace of an adept, and the other looked over his cards.

"Beg," he said, tersely.

"Take it and play. It would be a queer hand that I couldn't make four on."

"High, low, Jack and the game; four to one and your deal," he said, a little later, when the cards had dropped on the table one by one, and trick after trick had been stowed away under his left forearm.

From the moment that Barret pushed his money to the center he was the cold, imperturbable gambler again. Whether or no he hated his antagonist with the deadliest of hatreds, his eyes and voice showed nothing, and the professional smile on his lips seemed chiseled out of marble. He drew the cards together, ran them deftly in from the ends, and after shuffling them over and over a few times tossed them down to be cut. Then he dealt.

Brandt glanced at his hand and played without a word. He held king and tray and several other trumps, and used them for what they were worth, yet Barret made low, game, while his king was only good for high. The jack was sleeping somewhere in the deck head. Still, the advantage remained decidedly with Brandt! and the cards appeared to be bent on running,

his way. In three more deals he went out, with low in his hand and jack up.

"Double stakes, and my deal," whispered Barret, as he pushed his money up and drew the cards toward him. "You know where that leads to."

"A box for somebody. Not for me as long as I can make a bold stand."

He threw down ace, king and queen of trumps as he spoke, and caught the jack with the swing. Luck was all bent one way, and kept obstinately running in the same channel.

Again Bart Brandt drew in the stakes, and again Barret doubled, and dealt with the same imperturbability. If his face had grown whiter, his voice lower, and his movements a shade slower there was very good reason for it beyond the excitement of the game. The pure nerve that had kept him up thus far could not last forever against physical weakness.

Bart Brandt stared keenly at Barret and his stakes. It looked as though, if he won this game, the end must be at hand. Cool Cal's last buckskin was on the board.

And luck never changed. With the certainty of fate point after point was scored in Brandt's favor, and the game was not even close.

"So far you have it all your own way," said Cal, coldly. "There is one more game to play, and when lost that will settle everything."

"You still hold to that do you?"

For the first time Brandt looked curiously at his antagonist.

There was not a sign of flinching on his face as he replied:

"That was the arrangement; and when gentlemen sit down to a game they don't generally jump their own conditions. Put up or shut up."

"Up it is;—and the gentlemen are witnesses that you are running this game. I came here to give you a chance to win your money back—and it looks like you won't do it. If you don't—don't squeal when the game is over."

He pushed back all that he had won and the game began, the cards dropping as fast as ever, and the luck remaining unchanged.

"You've won," said Cool Cal at last, as the ace of trumps came fluttering down. "Take your stakes now or the next time we meet I'll shoot you on sight; the luck can't last forever."

He stood up as he spoke, folding his arms over his breast, and suddenly biting his lips till the blood came as a misty veil seemed to sweep over his eyes.

"Don't be alarmed about your future chances—you'll have none," responded Bart Brandt, coldly, deliberately drawing his revolver as he spoke.

Up rose the cocked weapon; and then, as the door opened behind them and a gang of tough-looking men rushed in, Bartlett's hands were flung over his head and without cry or groan he pitched heavily backward to the floor just while the report of Brandt's revolver was ringing through the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

SHORT RIDGE SAILS IN.

THE bullet from Bart Brandt's pistol was not the cause of Cal Barret's fall. On the contrary the lead struck the wall with an unmistakable spat. With the wound through and through him Cool Cal had been playing on his nerve, and had come to the end of his tether. An instant before Brandt fired he fainted dead away, and dropped as though he had been shot.

Brandt's thumb went back, and once more the hammer raised, while he glared over the table at the helpless form beyond. He knew well enough that his first shot had missed its mark; and, unmindful of the sounds behind him, he was evidently about to throw in another when his hand was knocked upward, and a voice quietly whispered:

"If I were you I wouldn't. You won your one shot and you had it. If you're not good on the wing that's not Cal's fault. I don't think he promised to hold still. Any more would look like murder. Don't you think?"

"Who the thunder sets you up for a judge in Israel? Hands off or head up the flume!"

"Not this evening—some other evening, Black Dam swears by the judge; and has an idea he would be happier if he was wearing a weed for his brother. Go slightly slow or they'll see what the experiment is good for. I'm a stranger, like yourself, but I know how the land goes. Granger is my name, David Granger. Maybe you heard of me at Bunco. If you think I'm not playing you square I'll be happy to argue the matter with you—now or any other time. But I think the case will keep."

"One-Armed Dave! I'll make you sick before you get through, if you're going to champion that thing on the floor."

"Don't get excited. It's only fair play I'm shouting for. I've an idea you'll do better somewhere else for the rest of the evening, and if your baggage ain't packed, why, the sooner you hustle it in and take a through ticket the safer you'll find it. I've not put you in a corner, and no one will be any the wiser if you go at once."

Granger's statement was true enough, in one way. He made no display of weapons and his words had been spoken so low that a bystander

even if listening could have made nothing out of them. All the same when he had knocked up the hand that held the revolver he had caught the drop with the next movement, and Bart Brandt was looking into the muzzle of a derringer hidden from the rest in its owner's hand and sleeve.

"Thanks, young man. I don't know but what you're talking common sense; and, as I don't care to leave this burg until I've milked that venerated relative of mine for all he'll let down, I believe I'll listen. Get the little whelp out of the road before he's tramped on, and when he comes around, say to him that if he knows what's good he'll leave his tracks with the heels toward the town. I expect to run it for awhile; and he'll find me mighty bad medicine if I take him under my care."

"A healthy sort of a chief you would make. Confound you, it takes a man to run Black Dam!"

Granger's sneer was thrown away, for, without listening to his response, Brandt wheeled and strode away. He might as well have thrown up his hands, so far as actions went. If he meant anything, it was that for the present he gave it up.

Such seemed to be the meaning that the man with the one arm took, for without another glance he stepped hurriedly around the table and bent over the prostrate gambler, placing his hand to his heart.

So cold and white did Barret look that one might well have suspected that he was dead.

He was not dead, however. The heart still beat, though sluggishly, and Granger was raising him up on his arm when he heard the sound of a smothered report, and looking up hastily saw Bart Brandt reeling away, until he vanished from sight in the crowd that had but lately entered the saloon.

"What's that?" he asked sternly, though never hesitating in his intention.

"You had a close call that time, mister. He had yer lined, but some one chipped before he could pull ther trigger. Look out fur him. He's ther bad man frum 'way back, an' he don't love yer, fur coin."

It was Pocket Pete that spoke; and he was still looking curiously in the direction in which Brandt had disappeared, as if trying to make out just how the thing had been done.

"Don't look fur him er fur me; but ef yer want ter see yer pard on his feet ag'in, kerry him out. There's a spry old chance fur war right hyar, an' when it comes, thar won't be much show fur a sick man. He's a gritty leetle cuss, too; but ef yer hed left him buy his own candy, you'd stand a better chance ter die an ole man."

"Thanks for the warning. I know him by sight, and that's about all; but he's no pard of mine. Only, when I get in the same boat, I generally hold on to the paddle till we ride over the riddle."

"You bet you do! Leastwise, you look like that kind of a hair-pin, an' I've seen yer tried. That's right. Hustle him out. The band strikes up, an' ther cirkiss hez begun. So long; I'll see you later."

And Pocket Pete slouched away toward the throng at the other end of the room with a look of curiosity on his tough and battered countenance, while Granger, with Cal Barret over his shoulder, stepped out into the street from the rear door that he opportunely discovered.

The citizen of Black Dam had not explained where he had obtained his information in regard to the Short Ridge gang, but he had evidently spoken by card, and the delegation put in its appearance at a much earlier hour than had been expected.

They came rolling in just in time to divert attention from the affair between Brandt and the nervy little gambler, and though they began with loud talk and a consequential swagger, it was only a question of time, in the minds of the citizens, how soon they would proceed to make good their boast of taking the town. They kept well together, and so did the men of Black Dam; and the two little armies faced each other, each talking for its own ranks, but both only waiting for the declaration of war which was sure to come.

Then Bart Brandt strode forward, without much regard for which side he hustled, and as he wheeled, with his eyes fixed in an ugly way on Dave Granger, there came the crack of a pistol, followed by his fall.

"What sorter a camp yer call this?" yelled Ready Rube, the leader of the men from the Short Ridge. "Yer shoot a man in the back when he's tryin' ter git away. Hyar's a clean case ov murder, an' ef thar ain't no law hyar, then it's time fur ther boyees from Short Ridge ter spread ther gospel. Who fired that shot? You trot him out an' we'll string him up."

Both sides glanced around after this proposition. The Short Ridge crowd had so monopolized attention that no one could say who had fired, or for what cause. The men of Black Dam had been called to the consideration of their own affairs, and so temporarily lost sight of what was going on at the table where the singular game had just been contested. If they had known, it is not very likely they would

have had any more to say, as the prompt acceptance of the cause of the judge's brother was looked upon simply as an excuse.

"No one talks, eh? All right. Hyar's yer law an' order crowd. We'll look over the tools, an' hang ther galoot ez has an empty barr'l. You can't go wrong when ye throw a brick into a Black Dam mob. All right, boys. Take 'em ez they come, an' when ye'r through run 'em inter ther back room. For'rads, men!"

"Mebbe you'd better look an' see how bad he's hurt; an' Black Dam 'd like to know how it kims to be your chip, anyhow. She kin gin'rally tend ter law an' order in her border. Is he a pard o' yourn?"

Pocket Pete was the man that spoke, and he had his eyes on Ready Rube as he dropped out the words. Though a stranger in the place, he did not hesitate which side to take. His own safety required him to make himself solid with the town people if he wished to stay there long, and he had not as yet decided that it was time for him to leave.

Anyway at all, there was some sense in what he said. If the toughs of Short Ridge were so anxious to avenge the fall of Bart Brandt, they ought to show a little more interest in the victim; yet no one had even stooped over the prostrate body.

"A stiff is a stiff, an' lookin' at him won't bring the life back," retorted Ready Rube. "But yer talk has some sense in it. Let's see who she be; mebbe it's one ov our crowd."

As he bent down the corpse gave signs that it was not a corpse at all, beginning to wriggle with the first gust of returning consciousness. Rube caught the man by the shoulder and flung him over upon his back, with a by no means gentle toss, thus, for the first time, obtaining a sight of his face.

The view surprised him.

"Hello, boyees; now we will chip in. Sure ez you live it's ther boss, ther king-pin ov ther Short Ridge—Jedge Brandt. Whar's the galoot that fired that shot? We want him, bad."

"Yer gittin' off yer eggs wuss than ever," retorted Pocket Pete, by no means dismayed by the fierce glance at him that accompanied the words. "Fu'st, he ain't dead—an' next, it ain't Jedge Brandt. Look out! He's comin' round, an' there's no tellin' whar he'll strike when he begins ter hit out. Thar's his shooter, jest under yer heel. If yer want ter make yerself safe I'd advise yer ter git it outen ther way afore he reaches fur it. He's a despr't cuss when he wakes up."

The utter coolness with which the man made his remarks had its effect. Ready Rube looked downward, and was puzzled. Recognizing that fact he took possession of the revolver that had dropped from Brandt's fingers as he fell, and then more tenderly raised its owner up.

"What confounded skull-duggery hes been started hyar ter-night. Ef this ain't ther jedge, I'll swear it's his brother, an' I ain't sure yit."

"Right you are, and it's brother it is," sung out a voice from the men of Black Dam.

"Then we'll go ahead ter git even fur ther jedge. He's got it through ther brain, an' kin never know who hit him. The man ov Black Dam ez kicks ag'in' justice shows he's layin' in with ther bloody thief ez did ther shootin'. Ready, boys. Out with yer guns an' forrads, march!"

He laid Bart softly back, and with the fallen man's revolver in one hand and one of his own in the other, stepped forward, the men from the Short Ridge following with wicked readiness. The war was about to open.

CHAPTER XV.

BLACK DAM BY MOONLIGHT.

MISS RAND had had what should have been an exhaustive ride, but when she had shaken the dust off of her skirts, freshened up her face with a liberal allowance of towel and water, and stowed away a hearty supper, she appeared none the worse for her jaunt. It was her father that looked the most in need of rest. He yawned, wondered whether the judge would come in from his office, and finally suggested that as they were pretty badly knocked about with a hard day's ride, they had better seek their rooms so as to be ready for the morrow.

"Fudge!" said Miss Belle, in response. "I've felt worse after an all-night dance, and then was ready to keep on going. You love your ease, that is the whole truth of it—and I don't blame you either."

"Well, what is there to be gained by staying up? You don't care about beginning your investigations in Black Dam by moonlight, do you?"

"That's an idea. Why shouldn't we? We might at least take a view of the promised land."

"Horrible! If the town is half-way equal to its reputation we should positively be in danger of our lives. Don't talk about viewing the promised land. I am no Moses, and I am not so meek as to want to die before making a closer acquaintance. In the morning will be time enough. Never do to-day what you can put off until to-morrow."

"You are not going to put me off that way."

I am too thoroughly anxious to finish one way or another and be off. Yes, by the moonlight be it. A short stroll will do us good, and I have already been asking a few questions as to the geography of the town. I think I could reach the principal places of interest with my eyes shut."

"Places of interest, good heavens! Well, come then! A willful woman must have her way."

"But I am not a willful woman."

"I am sure you have your own way in everything. If that is not proof positive I do not know what more you could ask."

"Still harping on that. When we left New York I thought you had yielded gracefully, like the dear, good papa that you are. You were willing to oblige me; and at the same time you had an opportunity to look after the investments that you had rather blindly made. So far you have had nothing to complain of. Your thousands are more than safe, the men carried you on their hands; and now, when you have got through with all that, you begin to discourage me. If you dared I believe you would turn around and go back without another movement in a matter which, if it does nothing else, concerns me to the amount of thousands."

"There is an old proverb, 'what is all the world to a man if his wife is a widow?' It does not exactly apply in this case, but the gist of it is not bad reading. I'll make you the same offer now that I did before we started. Leave here on the first stage out, without another inquiry, and on your arrival home I will deposit one hundred thousand dollars to your credit in any bank you name—or, what is better, you shall have that amount in registered United States bonds. You can clip your coupons and live at ease thenceforth to the end of time."

Instead of seeming overjoyed at this munificent offer Miss Belle drew herself up stiffly.

"You seem to think it is simply a question of money. True, there is a hundred thousand involved; but what is that to me? You have enough for both of us and I don't suppose I shall ever have cause to complain. Besides, I am not absolutely hideous. If I told what I think I might say there was a fortune in my face. There was young Rousveldt thought so; and was willing to make the exchange. No, sir. I have set out to clear up the mystery of Mira's disappearance, and I shall fathom it sooner or later."

"But, child, others have undertaken the work—even astute detectives who make the unraveling of such meshes their life-work—and they have failed. How can you expect to succeed? And why should you chance the wrecking of your life in such a chase? What is Mira Blair to you? Your eyes have never even rested on her."

"What is she to me? Truly that is the question of a miser among his money-bags. The same mother bore us both; the same blood, on one side at least, runs in our veins. Do you think I can enjoy in comfort the fortune that should be hers if she be in the land of the living? Perish the thought."

"But think you if she were living she would have made no sign? I tell you, Mira Blair knew well enough the fortune that she left behind her; and that by this time it would be reasonable to suspect that it was ready for her taking. If she has made no sign, it is either because she no longer lives, or because she is above the want of it. She has chosen to make a mystery of her life since she left her home; and in either case your effort to rend away the veil could not be what she would want. Be advised and search no further."

"You reason from the point of your wishes, and overlook the real truth. She went with the certainty that her father's curse followed her—how was she to know that that curse would turn into at least the semblance of a blessing? It is that I would have her learn as much as anything else. The money is but a token of forgiveness. He is gone, and she might doubt, but the gold remains."

"Romantic folly! I have warned you, though, and if you still insist, my promise holds good. I am at your orders. What would you have? To see Black Dam by moonlight? Very well. We will see it. I am ready for the sacrifice. Perhaps, when it is too late, you will see all this as wiser heads than yours already see it."

Mr. Rand appeared to be goaded beyond endurance. In some excitement he sprung to his feet, snatched up his hat, and hastened toward the door.

His daughter followed him.

"Do not be angry. You would think none the better of me if I yielded my belief in what is right. If you wish it we will wait until morning."

"No, no. Come now. The sooner we begin the quest here the sooner you will acknowledge its utter folly and hopelessness. I am not afraid; though no one who was not mad or moonstruck would think of venturing out to-night. Get a bell and we will ring it as we go along, while we cry from every corner-post: 'A woman named Mira Blair! When last heard from, she was eloping with a California miner!'"

When Solon Rand did drop the cold self-pos-

session that generally masked him, he could be as wild as any one.

If he thought to hinder his daughter in this way he was widely mistaken. In a moment she was by his side, with her fingers on his arm.

"We will go—but decently and in order. I do not expect to make any discoveries to-night—how should I?—but it is a step. The rest will follow."

Together they passed out into the street.

The hour was much later than they knew; and the town was far quieter than they had expected. They did not meet a soul, or hear a sound, until they came near Burke's "Emporium."

Then they heard dully the report of a pistol, and a moment later, as, having halted, they watched the building, they saw a man stride out from the shadow in the rear of the place, bearing on his shoulder a motionless form.

The two were on the opposite side of the street, and it was quite possible that he did not see them at all. As he went on in the direction whence they had just come Miss Belle turned to her father:

"That is one of our fellow-passengers, Mr. Granger, the man with but one arm. I wonder why he should have gone there—to the most notorious gambling-den in the place? And I wonder what has happened? Certainly that was a pistol-shot that we heard; perhaps that was a corpse he carried? Whose?"

"What is Double-Shot Dave to you, or we to him? We have come upon Black Dam in the midst of its merry-making. If it does not include us in its game we should count ourselves happy."

"Double-Shot Dave! That is a strange name; where did you learn it?"

"Oh, the judge posted me in regard to the man, of whom he heard from the driver—and elsewhere. The man is a gambler like the rest of them, and his *sobriquet* was only recently fastened upon him by reason of a peculiarity observed at Bunco. Several times he was there involved in a fight against odds. He has but one hand, you know, yet every time he fired one shot two men dropped. If you could investigate what has just happened over yonder I have no doubt you would learn that the same singular thing had again occurred. Perhaps he is carrying a victim away to his own private burying-ground. He has been here just long enough to start one."

"You think you will frighten me by such stories as those? You waste your breath. More likely that wounded man who came part of the way with us has fainted away, and Mr. Granger is carrying him to the Colonnade. The man was not fit to move, yet I heard him asking for Burke's place—and this, no doubt, is the result."

Mr. Rand was, in turn, inclined to be surprised at the extent of his daughter's information, though he made no remark. The two listened for a moment, and were then just turning away when they were confronted by an unexpected apparition.

With one taper finger warningly raised a beautiful girl glided toward them.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GIRL OF MYSTERY.

MISS RAND showed symptoms of wonderful agitation at sight of that face lit up by the moonlight. She threw up her hands and staggered back as though threatened by a specter; while a gurgling cry escaped from her lips. If the arm of Mr. Rand had not promptly closed around her it is possible that she would have fallen to the ground.

The old gentleman was surprised; but it was at the excitement manifested by his usually cool daughter. He saw the girl—she seemed to him little more than a mere child—too; but he noted nothing terrific in either her aspect or her gestures. Left to himself he would simply have turned the cold shoulder toward her and gone on about his business. When he saw how deeply Miss Belle had been moved he began to be actually alarmed for her. She did not say a word, but as she reclined in his arms her one hand pointed with cold rigidity at the girl, who stood regarding them, in turn with a newly awakened alarm, yet without speech or motion.

The very immobility of the young stranger caused Solon Rand to turn his attention once more, and more closely to her; and with an unexpected result.

He looked from one to the other, and saw what it was that had so deeply moved his daughter. No chance could it be that caused the two to so strongly resemble each other. He actually shivered as the thought darted through his mind:—

"What strange fatality is this? When least expected we have found Mira Blair herself!"

Nevertheless the head of Solon Rand was harder than that of his daughter; and so he recovered his self-possession the quicker. Wonderful as was the resemblance it was certain that this could not be Mira, since the face belonged to a girl much younger even than Belle. The longer he looked the more he was puzzled—the one probable explanation never suggesting itself until he heard it drop from Belle's lips.

"See, father, look! It must be—it is—my sister's daughter."

Saying this she advanced toward the girl, who remained in the same attitude as when first seen, though a pained look came into her face, as if she felt grieved at the consternation her appearance had caused.

"Who are you?" asked Belle, recovering something of her calmness by a wonderful effort, and stepping forward toward the girl, at the same time bending downward, peering fixedly into those eyes so wondrously like her own.

There came no answer in words. The girl mumbled some inarticulate sounds and laid her hand on her lips with a gesture that was full of meaning.

"Poor thing, she is dumb!" exclaimed Belle, in a tone full of pity.

Then her own fingers were raised and very nimbly they asked the question in the language of the mutes.

The face of the girl brightened. She understood, and at once her confidence went out to the fair young stranger.

Her fingers were bent together, were interlocked, were twisted into strange shapes.

"I am Helen Harcourt, looking for my father. Have you seen him?"

"Where is your mother?" was Belle's abrupt answer; and with breathless eagerness she awaited the reply.

"She died when I was a child," was the ready response. "Did you know her?"

"Perhaps. It even seems certain. Who was she?"

"I do not know, I think her name was Mira. Ask father."

"I must and will; where will I find him, and what are you doing here?"

"I have lost him and am looking for him. Have you seen him?"

"I know nothing about him: but I wish to. Come with me and I will take care of you. Are you not afraid, being alone in such a place?"

"Not at all, I am used to it. I lose him often. But he takes care of me the same, and I find him again. I should not be here; he would be angry if he knew; yet I could not stay away. Where would you lead me?"

"To the Colonnade Hotel. I have much to say to you. Do you see nothing in my face?"

Helen Harcourt made a deliberate scrutiny, and then as deliberately shook her head. She might have answered that she saw a handsome face, a friendly face, a face that drew her as few had ever done; but she knew that none of these answers touched the truth as Belle asked for it. So far as her own life and history went this countenance suggested nothing. Nevertheless she had confidence in it, for immediately afterward she made a gesture that signified her willingness to follow.

Belle turned to her father.

"We will go back now. It must have been Providence that urged me to this midnight stroll. Certainly neither reason nor blind chance could have led us up to such a result. Beyond a doubt here is the clew with which we may unravel the whole mystery. There can be no doubt this is Mira's daughter. When we reach her father he can tell us all that we wish to know."

"Perhaps," responded Mr. Rand, in a low tone. "But there is one thing you must not forget. There is a fortune for some one in the distance; and I do not intend to fall blindly into the wiles of an impostor. A hundred thousand dollars is a stake worth playing for; and though we have been cautious in our quest it is possible that the facts are known to those who would not hesitate to make use of them."

They both looked sharply at the girl and noted that her face flushed; though that might only be under the keenness of their gaze. At all events Belle never wavered in her intention. She held out her hand, which was frankly taken, and the child woman suffered herself to be led away.

Yet as she turned, she gave a snap of her finger and a dark little figure raised up from where it had been lying, just behind her, and curveted along as part of the procession.

"What in the name of wonder is that?" asked Mr. Rand, a little startled.

Belle laughed. The appearance was a relief to her overstrung nerves.

"A goat—probably a pet of hers. If we take one we must take both. You will hardly object?"

"What are you thinking of? Of course not. But we had better hurry away from this. There is no telling how soon the mob will transfer the seat of war from the inside to the outside of Mr. Burke's Emporium."

While they had been interested in Helen Harcourt they had been unmindful of what had been going on across the way. Now they heard the din rising higher and higher, as though Pandemonium had broken loose, and as they had a double reason for not wishing to be near to the turmoil they hastened off, now looking back over their shoulders, again at the girl who swept along between them, or at the four-footed attendant who crawled along in a way that seemed expressive of the greatest delight.

In this way they reached the Colonnade. As they neared the door Granger came out, and passing them without a word hastened down the street in the direction of Burke's. Either the man he had carried away was out of danger or

was past praying for. He would hardly leave him while his ministrations were urgently needed.

Once back in the Colonnade, Miss Rand again began to question the waif; while Mr. Rand and the goat, which had followed them in without hesitation, looked on with seeming interest.

"Where were you going when you met us?" asked Belle, using her fingers partly, and partly the broader language of signs.

"Anywhere. I just came. I was looking for father. Something in your face made me want to speak to you."

"But where do you live? How did you happen to come to Black Dam at all, and how did you reach it? There is no stage arriving at this hour."

"I have been living in a cabin in the mountains near Cactus Fork, with old Hannah. Something drove me, and I took Billy and set off on foot. It was a long way, but I was not afraid. I have money, too, as much as I need. I did not care to spend it for that, because I was not sure that it was right. If you will have them keep me here, I can pay. See."

She drew out her purse, one of the buckskin bags commonly used by miners to hold their dust, and held it up. Evidently there was enough coin there to supply her needs for some time.

"To be sure, you shall stay with us—as our guest. But who is your father? Where do you think he is now? What does he do?"

For the first time the girl hesitated in her answer. She looked perplexed and perhaps grieved. Presently she slowly spelled out the words: "I do not know."

"He must be found, then, if it costs a fortune."

The resolute look on Belle's face troubled the girl. She was shrewd enough, and such interest was unnatural in a stranger.

"Are you his friend?" she asked.

"I do not know," was the frank response.

"We are yours; and if he proves himself an honest man, we are his, better than you think. Do you remember nothing at all of your mother?"

"Nothing; but why do you ask that again? What was she to you?"

If Belle Rand had allowed herself to speak the words that were on the end of her tongue, she would have said, "She was my sister."

But there was time enough for that when the truth was more fully brought to light; for the present it was enough to gain her confidence, as she answered:

"Like yourself, there are some things I do not know, and wish to find out. You can help me, and when the truth is known you shall hear it. We will aid you to discover your father. After he has spoken, if there is need for it, we will tell you the rest."

Brief though it seems, the conversation took some time. When, after a few words in reference to the arrangements for the night, they looked around, Solon Rand was snoring in his chair and the goat had disappeared.

At once Helen's face grew troubled. She went to the door and peered out into the shadows of the hall, snapping her fingers as Belle had heard her do in the street.

No goat appeared, however, and Helen came back, moving her fingers in an excited way.

"Father is near," she spelled out. "Billy never would have left me but for him. He will bring him here if he finds him. Only wait."

But though they waited half an hour or more, Billy did not come back; and Miss Rand, at last wearied out, was fain to persuade her lately-found charge that it was best for them to retire.

CHAPTER XVII.

SHORT RIDGE SAILS OUT.

READY RUBE was the boss of the Short Ridge when at work, and when at play was the acknowledged chief of the whole gang. That he did not undertake to hold the town unaided was rather a surprise than otherwise, though he was scarcely drunk enough for so desperate an undertaking.

There were some very good men in Black Dam, and the Emporium was a bad place to try to set up an independent kingdom. Probably the latter consideration made him a little cautious, though a fight was what he wanted and expected, unless the town took water in a frightfully cowardly way.

So far Pocket Pete was the only man who had openly expressed his disapprobation, and he hardly counted. When half a score of men, with hands at their belts, stepped forward, it did not seem probable that there would be any more active opposition.

"You, there, throw up your hands!" was Rube's order, as he lined Pocket Pete with an airy movement of his right hand. "You've bin settin' up fur ther king pin, an' we always strike fur ther head center. An' don't fool 'round ther cyclone ov wrath. Ye'r jest about ez near ter Jordan's brink ez you'll ever git 'thout goin' across ther river."

The words were accompanied with a scowl. Pocket Pete gave no sign of having any idea of resistance, but neither did he appear to be likely

to break his neck in his haste to throw up his hands. He grinned confidentially, threw his foot over the back of a chair to place it upon the seat, and, with a twinkle in his eye, laid his right forefinger in the palm of his left hand, while he unblenchingly remarked:

"Thar ain't no man livin' sez more with ther same words ez Ready Rube, an' it does me good ter listen to him. Ez it ain't my shout at ther bar, an' no one else seems ter hev coin enuf ter call 'em up, I don't mind argyin' ther facts ov ther case till some 'un gits dry enuf ter wrestle with ther tumbler-juggler fur drinks 'round. You ain't goin' ter shute an onoffendin' man; an' ef yer try ter do ary thing else, I'll slug yer in ther jaw. So what yer goin' ter do 'bout it?"

To say that Ready Rube was surprised would be only telling half the truth; he was dumfounded. No one else in Black Dam would have talked so. His reputation was too well made for one acquainted with him to run such risks. The insult was so thoroughly on ice that he had to pause a moment to consider.

The point that Pete was a stranger to Black Dam and to Ready Rube's immense reputation gave him some relief, and instead of shooting without more ado, he answered in kind:

"Mebbe yer don't know what a heap ov danger yer in?"

"Which?"

"Oh, ye'r too fresh. We'll hev ter rub a leetle salt in an' barrel yer down. No shootin', now; but go fur him, boys."

There was a roar—half howl and half laugh—and as one man the Short Ridge gang rushed forward. No weapons were out, and the intent seemed to be to bear the insolent stranger down by sheer weight of numbers.

Pocket Pete showed no symptoms of wishing to avoid the scramble. So far he had looked like a slouch, but now he acted like a very good man. His foot dropped from the chair, which he kicked just in front of the advancing rush, and then he let go left and right at the stragglers that did not pile over it and each other head-first, in a heap on the floor. He hit quick and to keep. Before the gang knew what he was doing he had knocked three men down and was hungering for more.

The men hit were sound asleep; but those who fell over the chair were ready for business as soon as the knot could be disentangled; and the men of Black Dam were painfully slow about coming to the rescue, though it was pretty certain that, however good a pugilist he might be, Pete's chances against the united crowd would be slender.

It would have been no shame to him if he had appealed for aid, or fallen back to where the citizens would have to show their hand.

Instead of that he held up his fists as smiling as ever; and slung out another right hander as vicious as he knew how.

That was the last blow that he got in to count.

Ready Rube had apparently decided to avoid the use of fire-arms if possible, and standing a little out of the way issued his orders with the coolness of a great general, all the while keeping his eyes on the spectators, to be ready to change front the instant they showed a disposition to interfere.

Under his command the Short Ridge gang rushed forward *en masse*, and by sheer weight pressed Pocket Pete to the wall. They came so quickly that he only had time to get in a blow or two, and those at such close range that they were barely effective. Before he could shift back to get room in which to swing his shoulder they had him.

Very much to their surprise he made no desperate resistance. As soon as he could no longer strike, after the manner of Captain Scott's coon, he came down.

"There, boyees, that's ernuf. I'm double distilled lightnin' ez long ez I hev a chance, but when I see ther jig's up I peep ez low ez a fresh hatched chicken with ther shell stickin' on its back. Don't exhaust yerselves yankin' at me an' ye'll enjoy life a heap sight better, fur ther next ten minnits."

"Ef you'd 'a' quit yer durned nonsense afore yer begun thar wouldn't hev bin half ez much chance fur a corner on hemp," growled Rube. "Some ov you fellers bring him out, now thet you've got him. Let's see what he looks like. He's ther man ez shot ther jedgo's brother, fur a dollar."

"Better put up yer small money fu'st," coolly interjected Pete. "Ef yer should happen ter lose sich a pile ez that it mou't bankrup' ther hull firm. You don't want nothin' with me, anyhow; an' if yer does, s'posin' yer turn me loose an' start fresh. I didn't more ner half try that time."

"You hed better done yer level best while yer wer' about it, fur this ain't no funnin'. Search his belt an' pockets, boyees; an' ef yer finds an empty barr'l do ez I sed—hang him."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Pete. "I know whar you belong, ef that's ther level you work on. You an' him's in ther same boat—an' I know all about him."

"Then I guess you know we're all white men together. But bluff nor brag won't save yer now."

Pete looked sharply at the speaker. There

was no question but what danger was in the air, yet the prisoner never lost his self-possession, or gave the least sign of weakening, though he could hardly help but imagine that there was more in this resolution to take his life than appeared on the surface. Perhaps he had some resources of his own in reserve; but whether he had, or expected that the noose so ostentatiously brought forward would, in another moment, encircle his neck, he made no appeal to the citizens nor once looked toward them in what might be taken as a suggestion for aid.

With a cry of triumph the running-loop was flung over his head and tightened on his throat.

Then, as he folded his arms and glared defiantly at Ready Rube, there suddenly arose an uproar which to the late fracas was as a hurricane to a zephyr.

Down went the man whose hands were on the end of the rope, and down went two or three more, one after another, while a man charged backward and forward through the crowd in a way that put Pocket Pete's late humble exertions to shame.

The latter looked on a moment and saw that the propitious time had arrived, and in spite of his surprise he was ready to take advantage of it.

Bart Brandt was not only not dead, but was up and taking a hand in affairs in a way that was quite wonderful to see.

"Now, then, you galoots ov Black Dam, hyar's yer chance! It ain't me they're after, an' ef yer hold off now they'll go through you later on, after they've cleaned up him an' me. Ef yer mean sportin' hyar's ther time ter down with yer dust. All tergether, an' we'll clear ther board."

Without waiting to see the result of his appeal Pocket Pete tore the rope from his neck and bounded into the thickest of the throng, once more hitting straight from the shoulders with the intensest enjoyment.

Then, just as three or four scattering pistol-shots were heard, the solid phalanx of the men of Black Dam, who had been waiting for the reinforcements that had just arrived, moved up.

There was a rain of blows, a chorus of shouts; and the men of the Short Ridge still on their feet burst out through the front door in a wild retreat, while Pocket Pete, Bart Brandt, and their allies amused themselves by firing out those who had been left behind, scattered around on the floor.

And first of all, heels over head, went Ready Rube.

The victory such as it was seemed to be complete, and no one cared to pursue the flying enemy, that might ambush and shoot with a deadly revenge if the chance was given.

"My shout!" exclaimed Brandt, as he strode back from the door to the bar. "I've had fun here by the bushel, and hold no bad blood in for any one. I hear this is the camp where my venerated brother holds out. He's the nicest man I know, but he don't like my style. More's the pity for him. Come up, gentlemen, and drink with the jedgo's brother. I don't expect to stay very long, but while I do I'd like to be solid with Black Dam. Name your vanities, gentlemen. There's enough in the buckskin to foot the bill."

At the general invitation not a soul hung back. In a very few minutes Bart Brandt had made himself solid with Black Dam, and even Pocket Pete was hobnobbing with the man for whose murder the Short Ridge crowd were about to hang him when the corpse stepped in.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TWO BAD MEN AND A PISTOL-SHOT.

THE social party at the Emporium was a success while it lasted. Bart Brandt ignored the little affair with Cool Cal, and no one found it convenient to make mention of it. In fact, the good men of the Dam were inclined to carry him on their hands so to speak, and make much of the way in which he attacked the crowd from the Short Ridge just as they were preparing for a rush from the front.

The services of Pocket Pete to the town could hardly be entirely overlooked; but as he made light of them, and showed an inclination to shrink into the background, they were just mentioned and then forgotten. There was some rejoicing over the seeming way in which the toughs who had come in to take the town had been disposed of, numerous threats were made of what would be done if the thing should be tried over; and then Brandt again took the floor.

"That's all right, gentlemen. Whoop them up when you have the chance, but as I don't think it will come again to-night you will have to allow me to retire. I've had a hard pelt over the mountains, to-day; and as much fun to-night as a man can swallow without feeling the worse for more, so I'd better say, good-night. That bullet didn't make a hole in my head exactly, but it shaved along so close that it let some of the blood out, and if I haven't a ripping headache in the morning I won't be able to tell the reason why. Besides, I want to see my van-

erated and highly respected brother to-night. Take it all together it's about time I was moving."

No one was so unreasonable as to want to object, and Bart Brandt turned once to go. Then he made a half-wheel, that brought him face to face with Pocket Pete.

"Old man, I guess you belong up my way, and I've got a lot of things to say as we go along. Are you ready for a promenade?"

"Thar's a heap ov sense about what yer sayin', an' I wouldn't be white ef I didn't encourage it. I'm right in town, all dressed up. Lead out, an' I'll foller yer."

Together the two left the place, and in silence they pursued their way for some distance. When they had gained an offing, and no one seemed to be in hearing distance, Brandt spoke.

"I've seen you before, and can put two and two together. You're a side pard of that dandy rustler, Double-Shot Dave, and if I'm not 'way off you're both side pards of that nasty little gambler, Cal Barret. I had some trouble with him to-night, and expect to have some more. He's able to paddle his own canoe and I don't want you to put your oar in. You hear me? I think you tried that to-night."

"What you talkin' 'bout? I ain't no side pard ter any body but myself; an' when Double-Shot Dave an' me pulls together you kin let me know s'uthin' 'bout it. Him an' me don't make two ov a kind, nohow. Ez fur the leetle gambler, he's ther pure quill; but I never spoke a word to him in my life afore a few permiscuss at Bunco. So much fur that. Now, fur you an' me. I'd jest ez soon git along peaceable ez not; but don't you go ter prancin' 'round hyar, shoutin' fur some one ter knock a chip off. Ef yer do afore yer know it suthin'll drap—an' it won't be me."

"That will do, my friend. I only wanted to sound you a little. I see I wasn't far wrong. You and I can't live in the same burg, and I think you had better go. The judge and I, between us, will make a team hard to beat, and if you think of bucking against us you had better quit before you begin and go on to the next camp. Twenty-four hours, if you choose. After that, if I find you in Black Dam I'll mop up a floor with you. Hadn't you better go at once?"

"That's kind, fur it ain't often a man ov your stripe gives sich a warnin'. It's a thunderin' pity I ain't got my ticket bought an' trunk checked. It'd save a heap ov trouble fer you, now you've showed yer hand. But ez it's that kind ov game I'll show mine, an' you kin call fur whichever keerd yer wants. I'll shake hands an' call honors easy; or I'll give yer till to-morrer ter leave town; or I'll agree ter shoot on sight when next we meet—an' I don't keer a cuss which. I'm ther easiest pleased feller yer ever seen—only when somebody tries ter bluff me. Then I r're right up till they think they've got hold ov ther butt end ov an airtquake. You're a good man, Bart Brandt; but you an' me start level in Black Dam, an' ef you try ter crowd me I'll kill yer like a dog. Jest put that in yer pocket an' salt it down. Meanwhile I've got yer kivered."

The two in point of nerve were well met, and the only problem was whether the pistols in Pete's pockets were self-cockers. He had his hands on them, but so far there had been no warning click, and there was a bare chance that a lightning move might steal the drop.

Brandt did not attempt it.

"War it is, then, up to the handle. It won't do to drop you just after we've left the Emporium in company, but look out for the next time we come together. I only warn once. So long."

He turned away, and moved off with a steady, sinewy stride, while Pocket Pete, his hands still on his derringers, stood watching him.

"It would save a heap ov ther trouble that's a-brewin'," he muttered, "ef I war ter drop him now; but I can't do it, an' he knows it. Ef he war cuttin' loose, an' sloshin' about, a feller would hev an excuse; but ef I war ter bring him down now ther camp would hang me sure, an' so they orter. By an' by, when they find he is ther bad man from 'way back mebbe it would be a safer job. What ner thunder's ther matter now? Looks ez though he'd struck a snag er got on a center. Move up slowly, Pete, an' ef yer git a hand play every keerd."

Bart Brandt was acting suspiciously, though the distance between the two had increased so much that, in the uncertain light, it was hard to see just what he was after. To be certain Pocket Pete moved up closer.

When Brandt turned away his countenance was as unruffled as though he had just bid his dearest friend good-night; yet his thoughts ran in pretty much the same channel as those of the man he had left behind him.

"A thousand curses on him! What is he doing here, just now? After asking him out for a stroll it won't do to have him killed unless I can show a proper reason for it. The town is just undergoing a spasm of remoralization and they might think I did it on purpose. If I could come across the Short Ridge men I'd put 'em on the trail; but I think they've sloped. Holy morder of Moses! What's that?"

He stopped suddenly and stared straight before him as though he had seen a ghost.

No ghost was it, however; but simple flesh and blood—the same that had so frightened Miss Rand that same evening.

Helen Harcourt, possessed with a spirit of unrest, finding that she could not sleep, had hastily robed herself and sallied out into the street.

The two stood facing each other for a moment in perfect silence, thus allowing Pocket Pete, who could step with the wary lightness of an Indian, to get up within hearing distance.

Then he heard Brandt mutter:

"Just when I was deciding that I could run the other for profit—curses on it! If they once come together I can't run them both. How did she get here?"

He was staring straight into the face of the girl as he spoke, utterly careless that she might overhear him.

There was a strange look of inquiry in her eyes, but she showed no fear as he advanced.

"Who are you?" he asked, holding out his hand.

Helen shook her head, and placed her finger upon her lips—the same pantomime that had responded to the same question from Miss Rand. Only, when her fingers flew in the grotesque manner of mutes Bart Brandt shook his head also. That part of his education had been neglected, and he failed to grasp her meaning.

Yet after an instant's hesitation he nodded, and beckoning with his finger answered:

"Yes, yes, my child, I understand. Come with me and it will all be right."

"Guess not, purty," croaked the voice of Pocket Pete in his ear. "You're a stranger in camp yerself, an' don't know what she wants. I do. Guess I'm ther proper guide fur innercence in danger, an' ef she won't be willin' ter kin under the shadder ov my wing, I'll own up ter bein' a howlin' liar, an' say you kin take ther cake. Shake, leetle gal, but don't git inter range. I may hev ter drop him yit."

He held out one hand as he spoke—and Helen sprung eagerly forward to grasp it, a gleam of recognition lighting up her face.

His other hand was held where it would do the most good in case of any sudden, offensive movement on the part of Brandt.

Something of the kind was more than half expected, and for a moment the lease of life of the bad man from 'way back was just on the eve of coming to an end. A shade stronger suspicion on the part of Pocket Pete would have caused his finger to tighten on the trigger.

Bart Brandt had doubtless reasons of his own for throwing up his hand. He gave a stare at his enemy, and then, without a word, wheeled, and strode away. It might be that he retired as a baffled villain, or he might be only biding his time. If he was equal to his reputation the latter was the more likely.

Still watching him, Pete's fingers spelled slowly the more important of the words that dropped from his lips in a low tone:

"Met ag'in, leetle gal; an' just in time. He's bad medercin', don't yer never trust him. Git inter kiver quick er he'll play yer foul. What yer doin' hyar?"

"Looking for my father; have you seen him? He is somewhere near."

"No, I hev'n't. I dunno him, don't yer fer-git; but it ain't no use ter look fur him ter-night. Git under kiver, an' ef he don't turn up I'll hunt fur him in ther morning. Hev yer a place ter go to?"

He looked at her long enough to see her nod her head.

"Well, then, promise me ter go thar, an' I'll git ther p'int's ter-morrer. Whar yer at?"

"The Colonnade."

"Go, then. Don't be a fool. I'll keep an eye on yer. Promise."

She seemed to know that she had been or was in danger that she did not understand, and nodded gravely. Without waiting for her to question him the man made a sweeping gesture, and she turned back and began to retrace her steps, leaving him to commune with himself.

"Dog-gone my tail feather, ef I hev'n't struck somethin', fu'st clip! I couldn't hold over Bart Brandt like that ef he wasn't layin' back till ther stakes was w'f' he goin' fur. It's goin' ter be war, an' nothin' shorter. Wonder how the dumb gal come hyer, an' who she is. Second time I've backed her hand an' seen her go off 'thout axin'. I'll foller it up to-morrer, though, ef I'm a-livin'; an' I'll know what knocked ther jedge's brother endways when he seen her. Thar's a game up ez usu'l, an' you bet Pocket Pete are elected ter take a hand in it."

And then he dropped flat on his face with both hands outstretched as there came a flare of light, and the sound of a pistol-shot.

CHAPTER XIX.

A LITTLE SCHEME FALLS THROUGH.

THOUGH Pocket Pete took to the gutter with the rapidity with which a plainsman drops into a buffalo wallow before an Indian charge, he was by no means sure that the shot was aimed at him, though he heard the lead whistle by unpleasantly near to his head. When there was an exclamation a few yards behind him, and the

noise of running footsteps, he was certain the trouble was from the rear and locked hastily in that direction, just in time to see a man disappear in the shadow of a neighboring cabin.

At that instant with a spring Pete charged his position, and pistol in hand ran, not on the trail of the fugitive, but, if possible, to intercept him at the rear of the shanty. As he went he was thinking that in the fleeting glance it was barely possible he recognized Ready Rule.

He was too late, however.

The footsteps could be heard in the distance, but he did not gain a second glimpse, nor did it seem likely that pursuit would be successful. He gave it up with the same promptness with which he had begun it, and walked slowly back, keeping a keen eye around him, however. Although as cool as the coolest he could not help a start when he heard a voice addressing him:

"Easy now, my friend. No snap-shots till you see what's in the wind. I caught a fellow trying to do some dirty work, and as it was behind your back I didn't wait to ask your pleasure. There lies his knife, and if I'd come on the carpet a trifle later the blade would have been between your shoulders, and I would have had to plug him in real earnest."

Sure enough, there lay a wicked-looking knife, just where it had been dropped, as the speaker, Dave Granger, had shot it from between the would-be assassin's fingers.

"Thankee, pard, et's white you are, an' Pocket Pete sez it. I hed my eye on ther gal, er he'd hardly stalked in on me that way. It's ther second time I've hed ter say, Thankee. War yer countin' on stayin' long 'bout hyar? 'cause ef yer war I would re-mark it's 'bout ez unhealthy a locate ez you an' me could strike. Ef I could advise I'd say, pull stakes an' jaddle on ter whar ther climate ain't quite ser sultry. Ef not, keep both eyes peeled, an' hand on yer scooter. There's a game up, an' they wants ter freeze you an' me out, sure. Look out fer ther jedge's brother. He's ther bad man from 'way back, an' he means ter kill."

"Thanks fer the warning, but I think I can hold my end level, even in Black Dam. You did me a little service to-night, so when I saw the chance I chipped for you. Honors are even now, and I hope the trouble fer the night is over. Are you striking for the Colonnade?"

"I wasn't, but I am. Ef ther gal's thar, all right, I'll turn in. Ef she ain't I'm coming out on ther war-path."

"What girl is that?" asked Granger, as they went away together.

"Blamed ef I know, prezactly. I met her at Rat Trap a year ago, an' downed a tough that was givin' ther kettie thing lip. She can't hear an' don't talk, an' ez I hed a sister once same-ways afflicted I've got a kinder warm heart fur her. Ther funny thing are ther she's ther very image ov ther young lady ez come in with us on ther stage. An' that Bart Brandt knows 'em both er some one lies."

"That is strange. As near as I know it Miss Rand never met him. She never was in this region before; and certainly she never recognized the judge on the stage."

"Thet's so; but then yer can't most always sometimes tell. There's a game somewhar. Ther ole man don't look ez though he war a frolickin' 'round hyar ter put money in Black Dam; an' it's a queer place ter bring his darter a visitin' unless they hev suthin' behind ther curtin. They're all both three at ther Colonnade and I'll know more about it in ther mornin'."

"Perhaps. But it's not always easy to comprehend what a woman is after, and it breaks a pretty good man all up to try. What do you suppose Bart Brandt has to do with the matter?"

"Can't prove it by me. Only he seems ter think ther two paddle in ther same boat an' he's afraid ther leetle dumb 'un's goin' ter make trouble jest when he war a-layin' out ter manage ther other one. Mebbe thet's suthin' in your line so I give yer ther p'int's an' you kin put 'em in yer pocket an' salt 'em down. Hyar we are at ther Colonnade. Nighty-night. I'll see you in A. M."

"Queer sort of a man that," thought Granger, as Pocket Pete turned and strode away again. "Seems as though I'm fated somehow to back his game and I guess he's not as worthless as he looks. He acts friendly enough, but it might not be wise to trust him. Wonder how Bill Burdock's patient is doing. Might be worth while to call up and see. He was a gritty littleascal, and I feel like being his friend just for the way he stood up to the bare rack, without a chance for fodder. I'd like to get the judge interested in keeping the thing from going any further, and, it's a heap pity he had to leave town to-night. I wonder if it could be that he knew his brother was coming and didn't want to meet him?"

Meantime Pocket Pete who had changed his mind drifted away again on an exploring tour, and from the way he acted any observer—if such there had been—might have thought that he was not at all squeamish about his ways and means.

Keeping well in the shadow, to avoid any curious eyes, he cautiously approached a rather

small, but strongly built edifice the front of which bore a number of signs of greater or less size, on most of which the name of Bailey Brandt appeared.

The front of the little building had a dark and deserted look, but Pete, after a glance at the shutters, stole around to the rear, and had the satisfaction of seeing a little line of light shining through a crevice.

He approached the spot carefully, and after making sure that no one was watching him applied first his eye and then his ear to the cranny.

He saw nothing; and, for a time, heard nothing. Then there was the sound of a chair, pushed back a little, over the floor. While he listened for a repetition of the sound there was the noise of footsteps in front, followed by a low, peculiar rap at the door.

"Nothin' like firin' at the pigeon ef yer does hit ther crow. Hyar's suthin' at last."

The occupant of the room heard the knock but he took his time answering it. When it was repeated he seemed to rise from his chair and stride to the door, which he threw open.

"Come in if you're white; if you're not, stay out," was his salutation.

From anything that could be made out of the voice Pocket Pete rather suspected that this was Judge Brandt speaking, and the caller appeared to be of the same opinion. With a muttered growl he accepted the not very cordial invitation, following the speaker into the back room.

Once there, there was a revelation.

"Hello! What you doin' hyar?"

Pocket Pete could hear the words quite plainly, and could imagine the start with which they were uttered. He had by chance obtained a good though brief view of the man as he passed behind the light; and to his surprise his eyes rested, not on the judge, but on his brother.

"Ah, you sabbe, do you? Not the least necessity for you to become excited. Pray, keep perfectly cool. Here I am not myself, but the representative of brother Bailey, who has left me in charge. If there is anything to be said in regard to the development of the Short Ridge, spit it out; I am a mining expert myself, and what I don't know about shafts—especially lead shafts—is hardly worth knowing."

"Well, I'll be durned!"

The visitor was Ready Rube, and the cool audacity of his reception had thrown him all abroad, temporarily.

"Very true—eventually. But meantime there's a chance, perhaps, for a better use. I might shoot you, of course, as I certainly will, if I see your hand fooling around your pistol-pocket much more. How do I know whether or not the thing is loaded?"

"That is cool," was Ready Rube's hot answer. "Why, curses on you, you kicked me once to-night—kicked me. And I came here to tell the judge that I couldn't rest a day or night till I had got even—that he'd be short a brother or a boss, an' he could hev ther chance ov losin' both. I thort I could ketch him afore he left, for I seen the man from Cactus Fork ez come for him, an' he said he wouldn't start fur an hour."

"Exactly. Perhaps he wouldn't have gone if he hadn't known in what good hands he was leaving matters here. Just consider me as him, and tell us the story. I'll see what can be done. By the way, there's cigars and a private vial. Enjoy yourself while you reel off the yarn. I opine that business has closed for the night, and it's some hours till morning."

"Of all cool hands you lay over the deck! I don't care if I do. I'm ready to be as square as the next man, and I can bottle up till I find out what's in the wind. If I can see straight all this frolic war'n't got up fur nothin', an' ef there's more money er blood in it thin I kin see furst sight spit it out. I'm waitin'."

He coolly filled a tumbler, lit a cigar and threw himself back in a chair to listen.

"Now you come down to common sense I'm willing to give you a hint. You didn't come in here on the howl to-night for nothing. You've got your work done and the ready coll in your pocket for doing it. The best plan for you is to go home and say no more about it until you're called on for another lift. Sabbe?"

"I kin see a glimmerin'—but cuss me ef I make out whar ther judge kin in. D'yer mean he hired us fur you ter lay out? Ef that war his game blame me ef I don't snatch him bald-headed the next time we meet."

"Maybe you're forgetting just how to spell a-b-l-e, ble, able. If Bailey has improved as much as I think he has he'd give you the most interesting time out of jail. But that's neither here nor there. You came in just five minutes too late; and the principal fellow wanted was out of sight before you began to tune up. After that I had to finish up so as to leave things in shape for the next pitch."

"What sort ov wind yer givin' me? Didn't I hev ther chap with a rope round his neck, and all ready for a send-off?"

"That fellow!" Bart Brandt snorted, indignantly. "He was of no account, though, curse him, I'd give a hundred dollars to walk behind his funeral. No. You're way off, and there's no use to say any more about it; though, if you

had been working for me I'd have given you a racket that you'd have remembered."

"Hand over yer hundred," hastily interrupted Rube, who had just mastered the offer. "I've had one hitch at him on my own account, an' failed. I'll take another on yourn; an' I'll stake big money I make the rifle."

"Thanks; but I don't pay in advance. I'll settle though, at the funeral."

"Done ag'in—ef ther judge'll back me. You an' me even, kin train tergether ef it's ter take a shy at him. Gi'n us yer hand at ninety days."

"I'll give you my hand if you're game to carry the rest of the job out; but I don't shake unless it's with a thoroughbred, ready for thick and thin. How is it?"

The two hands hung in the air, not quite meeting, as Ready Rube answered in a lower tone, that was almost a whisper:

"I'm game fur anything in good company, from robbin' ther mail tersackin' a city. Thar's my hand; now what yer want done?"

The hands joined, and then, with the suddenness of thought, Bart Brandt wheeled and fired a shot straight at the crevice in the shutter, behind which Pocket Pete had stood listening.

The window-sash was already raised and without an instant's hesitation Brandt sprang, feet foremost, at the shutters, which flew open before him, and he dropped lightly to the ground.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MAN FROM CACTUS FORK.

BART BRANDT, after what had already passed between him and Pocket Pete, would hardly fear to allow him to hear that he had a scheme for his extinction, especially if he had hopes that he would never be able to get away with the intelligence.

It was pretty certain that he knew that Pete was at the window, and believed that when Ready Rube lowered his voice the ear of the prowler would be pressed closest to the crannie.

The shot went where it was aimed for—right through the crevice—but an instant before Pocket Pete had quietly withdrawn. Not every man would have been willing to forego the chance of further information on account of a vague suspicion. He did, the moment he fancied that there might be something of a trap in all this, and from a safe vantage-ground he watched the harlequinade with a satisfied chuckle.

"Ah, brother Bart ain't no man's fool. I kinder spicied ez he'd dropped to me, an' I wurn't fur wrong. I reckon I've got no more bizness 'round hyar ter-night; but it wern't altogether an unprofitable investment. Now I will bunk in."

He slipped away without being seen; and as the shot had not attracted any attention, and his enemies were behind him, Pete reached the Colonnade without any interruption, and enjoyed at least a fragment of a night's rest, though if he had known what was happening he might have decided that it was at least advisable to keep his boots on. He had caught something that was said about a man from Cactus Fork, but it seemed to him that that individual, if not mythical, was at least only incidental.

The man from the Fork, considered himself of a great deal of importance.

After the brief-mentioned interview with Ready Rube he lounged away, and turned up at the Emporium—which all visitors to Black Dam seemed to take in as one of the sights.

The excitement over the riot had calmed down, and though the attendance was a little larger and the talking was a little louder than usual the business of table and card was flourishing finely, little knots flipping short cards whenever they could find a table, and Jimmy himself presiding behind his lay-out.

Into this crowd the stranger edged, without attracting particular attention.

He was a well-built fellow, rough around the edges, so to speak, and though a stranger, was not likely to be taken for one of the men from the Short Ridge. In general appearance he resembled a cowboy more than a miner or a sport, though, from his keen and confidently wicked eyes, it seemed that he could hold his own anywhere.

He had been there ten or fifteen minutes, listening to the talk that was going on around him, before he was drawn into any conversation. Then Hank Green—the same individual who had interviewed Pocket Pete—caught sight of him and had a word or two to say.

"Stranger, hyar, be you? Ef so, thar's room enuf fur all, ef they're solid with ther town."

"Yaas. Sorter stranger like."

"Goin' ter ketch on hyar? Likely place fur a man ov grit, an' the right stripe."

"Can't say ez I squinted that way, prezactly. I'm King Cole ov the cowboys, frum Cactus Fork. They wanted Jedge Brandt thar bad, an' I rode over ter kerry ther news. Ther jedge war in sich a hurry lightin' out that he couldn't wait tell I got grub an' rest so he hed ter go on 'thout me. I'm goin' later on; but while I war a-restin' I thort nebhe I'd better see what ther camp's made ov. Sorter lively, ain't it?"

"You jest bet she are. Ef you'd come a bit sooner ye would 'a' hed a chance ter see."

"Ole bizz'ness, were she?"

"Two hundred an' fifty to ther inch, an' standin' on ther last notch. Ef yer ain't in too much ov a hurry it'll do yer good even ter hear on it."

"Hurry kin wait. Spin it out after we take a drink. When a man treats me right he'll find nothin' mean about me."

The two drank together, and then King Cole listened with interested attention to the story of the gritty game of seven-up that Cool Cal had played, and the succeeding riot.

"An' this hyar Barret—I'd like ter see him, I've hearn on him more ner once. Whar did he git to?"

"Oh, I jist reckon he went 'round ter ther Colonnade, whar he's stoppin'. He'll be cut ag'in, an' then I wouldn't wonder ef ther fur would fly."

"My luck to a dot. I won't be hyar to see it. Ef I ride hard I kin ketch up to ther jedge; an' I s'pose that's what I orter do. Ef it comes off you kin tell me how she goes the next time I come this way. I orter be goin' about now."

"So long, ole fel. Glad ter hev met yer."

King Cole did not at once leave; but before long he called up Green again and then took his departure.

The road to Cactus Fork seemed to lie under the back windows of the Colonnade, for there, not long afterward, Cole might have been seen, prospecting around in a way that showed he was either reckless of his life, or else had a vast fund of nerve. There were enough guests at the famous hotel who would have enjoyed a shot or two at a detected prowler.

Fortunately for him the inmates of the house were all buried in sleep, and his investigations were continued in safety.

Probably he had some other information besides that obtained from Hank Green. After counting the windows, beginning at either end of the house he turned his attention to one at which there was a faint glimmer of light.

Under it he lay down awhile, looking cautiously around and listening eagerly.

The way seemed clear and he climbed first up to, and then, after a brief hesitation, through the window, at once dropping lightly to the floor.

In the shadow he crouched, drawing his breath with short, noiseless inspirations, while he stared around the room.

A feeble light was given by a lamp on a rough stand, but it was sufficient for him to see that save for the faintly outlined form on the bed the room was tenantless.

He smiled grimly to himself as he drew from its place in his boot a broad-bladed knife, and holding it well forward, stole on tip-toe, and almost bent double, toward the bed.

Across the foot of the bed was flung the clothing of Cool Cal. Any one who had seen the gritty little gambler at the Emporium would have recognized it in a moment, and the "biled" shirt-sleeve that rested on the cover certainly could belong to no one else in the camp unless to Solon Rand. And Mr. Rand's head was gray as that of a badger; while the crisp curls that lay on the pillow were a dark, chestnut brown. There could be no mistake about the man, and very little about the intentions of King Cole.

He crouched down to the floor at an uneasy movement of the sleeper. Desperate though he was, he had evidently no desire to alarm the house.

Barret was not awake, however. He gave a sigh, and then his breath came as regularly as ever. Cole waited a moment before he began to rise slowly up.

Then—a cyclone struck him.

The knife went one way, and King Cole another. His extended hand just failed to catch the bed, and he went headlong on the floor with a bang that rung through the building like the report of a cannon.

Just what happened he could not guess, but as he went scrambling under the bed he gave a look over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of horns and hoofs, and heard a noise that seemed to him to be a blast from Gabriel's trumpet.

Imagination helped him out wonderfully. He saw a face with flaming eyes, long, pointed beard and horns that might belong to that enemy of all mankind who is supposed to be around when such deeds as this were in contemplation.

Cole might have turned at bay under the bed if he had not heard some one bounce out from the next room and come running toward the door, while Cal Barret was evidently wide awake, however illy fitted he might be for a hand-to-hand conflict with the cowboy.

Altogether this was more than King Cole could stand. He shot out from under the foot of the bed and bounded toward the window.

As his knee touched the sill the catapult was again applied from behind, lifting him fairly into the air, and sending him, spread-eagle fashion, out into the night, while the goat—whose disappearance had given Helen Harcourt so much trouble, raised his forefeet upon the sill, and looked after him with a victorious blat, that told him the nature of the fiend he had encountered.

He did not stay his retreat, though if thoughts could have had sound he would have left a lurid

trail of curses behind. Cal Barret's room was already a fortress. As King Cole struck the ground Bill Burdock without stopping to try the latch, sent his shoulder through the door, and burst into the apartment, while Pocket Pete, also aroused by the sounds, came close in his wake.

The explanation of the racket was simple. Billy had been quietly sleeping in one corner when the intruder entered, and as Cole presented such an elegant mark he immediately put his forehead to the spot where he thought it would do the most good.

Cool Cal's hands were under his pillow, searching for the weapons he always put there when he retired, and perhaps it was just as well that Burdock had left them in his pockets, when he took charge of him after Dave Granger had brought him back. Barret might not have understood why Pocket Pete was standing at his window working his pistol, as fast as he could draw trigger, at the distant form of the fleeing Cole.

CHAPTER XXI.

ONE MYSTERY SOLVED.

"WHERE in blazes did you put my revolvers?" yelled Barret, as the stage-driver entered. His voice was a good deal stronger than any one would have dreamed, who knew all that he had gone through in the last twenty-four hours.

"I never needed them worse, and I'd have been killed sure if it hadn't been for Billy. He's worth a dozen men. He's all there when the pinch comes, and don't stop to consider the odds. He wouldn't have left me here for some one to crawl over while I was moulting."

"What's ther racket, anyhow? Hyar's yer tools; but blame me ef I thought you'd ever want ter be usin' 'em ag'in. Are you hurt?"

"Hurt! No; but I'd have had my last sickness if it hadn't been for Billy, there. He caught a bloody pirate in my room, and bounced him without help or warning. Who's that at the window? He must be a friend or Billy would mount him; but he's wasting good lead. The villain is half-way back to Bunco by this time. There's his card on the floor. Pick it up and see what it reads like."

Cool Cal's keen eyes had already seen what had escaped Bill Burdock.

Driven deeply into the floor the knife of King Cole stood near the foot of the bed where it had been flung from his hand. As Burdock stooped and pulled it from its place, Pocket Pete turned away from the window in disgust.

"That's the deccivin'est light I ever picked trigger in. Blame me ef I mightn't ez well hev bin shootin' a mile at a flea on a ground-hog's back. What's that yer got thar?"

"Pears ter be a knife," responded Burdock, a little sourly. He was out of conceit with himself, and not in humor to entertain outsiders.

"Eh? So it is—an' hyar's ther mate to it. Take my guns ef they didn't both kin out ther same shop. Looks ez though ther' war a gang ez drawed their weepins from ther same quartermaster, an' used 'em in ther same way. This one war aimed fur my back, an' that one fur his, an' ef ther men thet used 'em all both ain't pards, thar's ther same man behind 'em. That's a pint yer kin put in yer pocket an' then salt it down."

"And the first letter of that man's name is Bart Brandt," put in Barret, looking from one blade to the other, and noting the similarity.

"Right you are," answered Pete, promptly. "I used ter say he war a good man, but I begin ter think he ain't fit to lead blind burros ter water. Ef ther jedgo are ther same stripe, they're a pair ov holy terrors."

"Don't shoot yer lip off too much about Bailey Brandt, 'cause Black Dam swears by him; but right hyar I don't mind sayin' I never took much stock in him. I'd trust ther other funder—an' that wouldn't be ez fur ez you could sling a bull by ther tail. Now dry up, or you'll talk yerself blind. An' here comes all Black Dam to see what's the frolic."

The inmates of the house had been pretty well aroused, and having had time to jump into their clothes, now put in an appearance at the door in force.

They got no further, however.

Billy took it into his head to defend the fort, and made a demonstration that stopped progress, in the general surprise that he caused. From the hall outside queries were raised, and Bill Burdock went out to satisfy them, closing the door behind him.

The lock was shattered, but the door held shut of itself.

Pocket Pete looked at the window, the door, Cool Cal, and the goat. Then he approached the bedside.

"Ef I war you," he said, with a grain of hesitation, "I'd stay at home an' look after my farm an' fambly, an' not be playin' ary sich despr'it games as those at Jimmy Burke's."

"What do you mean?" answered Barret, with a cold stare.

"I mean, I think I kinder recognize Bill—hevin' seen him er his brother at Cactus Fork a year ago. Thar war a purty leetle gal ez b'longed with him, an' I seen her ag'in hyar in Black

Dam ter-night, just when yer friend, Bart Brandt, war about ter lead her away. She told me she war lookin' fur her father—an' ez I brung her hyar ter ther Colonnade, I kinder think when she struck you she found him."

"Who are you? I don't remember to have ever seen you before to-day; and I tell you I'm not taking on trust every man that asks questions about my affairs."

"I don't want yer ter take me on trust; I'm only talkin' fur ther leetle gal. I hed a sister once ez war dumb, an' that gives me a big heart fur any child on the same level. Ef they're after you, they won't make more ner a mouthful ov her. An' ez Bart Brandt ain't likely ter do anything ez ain't got coin behind it, you kin figger it up whether thar's anything ter make it wuth his while. Melbo that the angel thet kin over in ther hearse with her father ter-day hez suthin' ter do with it. Ther Brandts hangs ter-gether, I don't keer a cuss what they say; an' ther jedgo warn't a-gallivantin' 'em 'round fur nothin'. I'm jest tellin' yer how ther land lays, ter my lookout, fur ther good ov ther gal. I don't want ter help yer ter kerri yer contract. I don't want ter wring in—an' ef yer needs it, I'm game ter give yer a grub stake ter see yer outen town; but long ez that hole in yer chest ain't healed up, Black Dam ain't no place fur you, an' Pocket Pete sez it."

The little gambler listened to the lengthy statement with close attention, and when it was finished held out his hand.

"I'm not afraid to trust you. You're no slouch, tough as you look. There is such a girl as you describe, but I thought she was miles away from here. When Billy found his way in, I had an idea it was the dumb luck of a brute that brought him to me. I'm not as cold as I look, and I thought I had provided for Helen's safety well enough. If she is here have the news broken to her, and bring her to me. She will have no rest nor sleep till she finds me."

"Ef she is hyar, yes. I left her on the stoop, a-comin' in not long ago, an' I could 'a' swore she war all right; but sence they've tried a flip at you, what was ter hinder their hevin' a shy at her? Yer right. I'll see ther boss ov ther lay-out, an' hev ther thing hunted up. Ef anything hes happened to her, count me thar till ther bank's straight ag'in."

As Burdock had finished his explanation, and a good portion of the guests had transferred their attention to the outside of the building, he re-entered the room, which gave Pocket Pete a chance to slip out to pursue his investigations.

And almost the first person he met was Solon Rand.

He was dressed, and seemed very much excited.

"Here, you," he exclaimed, "can you tell me where I can find the landlord? Pretty doings, these. Roused out of our sleep at the dead of night by a fusillade of firearms, and the rushing of a thousand feet. What does it mean, sir; what does it mean? Is there any danger?"

"Ef yer didn't ax quite so many questions, you'd git a heap more answers. Nothin' serious. A feller climbed in at Cal Barret's winder, an' I war doin' some dog-fool shootin' at him ez he left by ther same rowt. No danger—not a durn bit. Me an' ther goat are good fur a dozen sich."

He tried to slip past, but if he wished to get away, his words were unfortunate. The mention of the goat recalled to Mr. Rand's mind an avalanche of questions.

"The goat! Then, perhaps, you can tell me what has become of the dumb girl who owns it. We brought them here out of the street. First the goat slipped away, and then the girl. Now my daughter is half-crazy about her for fear she is lost, or some harm has come to her."

"What's that, ole man? I brung her back hyar meself, an' she promised she wouldn't wander. I've found her father fur her, an' expected ter start a family jubilee. Go slow an' say it straight. You may be startin' a bigger trouble than yo'r aware ov."

"There is nothing else that I can say. When Belle was awakened by the riot she found the poor thing missing. Noise could not frighten her away; but it may have had something to do with her disappearance."

"There'll be a bigger noise when Cool Cal gits on ther war-path. We'd better see ther boss ov ther outfit an' have a search ov ther shebang. Then, ef we find her still missin', I'll break it gently to her father."

"Ah, there he is. I must see him—we must both see him. But not now. The morning will do better, when we are cooler. Go; have the house searched; have the town searched! My purse will pay any expenses. If you obtain any news let me know at once. After this I shall hardly go to sleep again to-night. I will keep my eyes open, and watch my daughter."

Mr. Rand grew the more excited the longer he talked; and Pocket Pete, who would not have lost his *sang froid* if tumbled end over end by an earthquake, had no further use for him in his present condition. He slipped away to continue his search, leaving Mr. Rand to go back and console his daughter as best he might.

And Miss Belle, though troubled lest some evil had befallen her *protegee*, or that the clew

she had believed she held might vanish, was by no means as excited as Mr. Rand believed, and certainly had no fears for her own safety.

But though Pocket Pete enlisted Jerry Tucker, the good-natured landlord, and a thorough search was made, no trace could be found of the missing girl; and it was with a troubled face that he returned to Cal Barret's room to report his failure.

Cool Cal did not belie his name and reputation.

"You've done your best, I have no doubt, and I don't ask you to try again. You say you and this Rand have started a couple of men out over the town. Thanks—though I don't know him. If they find her, well and good. If they don't, to-morrow Billy and I will take the trail; he to find, and I to kill."

"Don't worry yerself thinkin' 'bout it. I'm hyar, an' so's Burdock. Dave Granger'll chip in, too, when he hears the way the game runs. There'll be enough. You jest lay lack an' git well. A man with a lead shaft through his gizzard hez ez much ez he kin wrastle with."

"That be hanged. The ball went in one side and came out the other; but it didn't go through. It ran around a rib, and I'm good as two dead men. It's loss of blood that is the matter with me, and I can beat that any time with twelve hours' rest. Clear out now. Bill Burdock will look after me, and I want to sleep, anyway."

And Cool Cal closed his eyes, and by a supreme effort of the will dropped off into an uneasy slumber before the racket had fairly quieted down.

CHAPTER XXII.

PADDY THE WHEELER TAKES WATER.

BLACK DAM, as has already been intimated, was reached by a cross-line of stages, that drew tribute from other lines that intersected it at several points. In this way it had daily connection with some part of the outside world.

On the day following the advent of Solon Rand and daughter another stage was bound for the town, though by a different route. It was a shakly, weatherbeaten vehicle, drawn by four gaunt animals that looked as though they might have been run under saddle till they could go no more and then put into harness, when, by bracing against one another they could keep from tumbling down. Just what was the power which drew the coach was a conundrum of which the horses, when in a state of rest, did not seem to be a solution. Once moving they kept on going at a jog-trot, probably because they were too weak to stop.

As if the antiquated stage was not enough for the ancient horses the load it carried was not a very light one, though the number of passengers was small. The weight consisted principally of trunks and boxes, piled in the front and hind boots.

Of passengers there were but three.

The most important of these, judging by his own account of himself, was Paddy, the Wheeler. He was a low-browed, heavy-jawed Irishman, whose hair stuck up straight, whose beard stuck out, while his whole body bristled with arms. When he moved outside of the coach he had a carbine strapped on his back, a pair of revolvers in his belt and a miscellaneous assortment of weapons at the back of his neck and in the legs of his boots. He and his pard had come from somewhere beyond Cactus Fork.

His peculiar pard was of less importance since he was known only as Jack. He modestly listened while the Wheeler did the talking for two, and only by the vicious twinkle in his eye at some atrocious recital did he betray how bad a man he might be.

The third passenger had the privilege of occupying the whole of the front seat, and receiving an occasional silent stare from the two, who, between times, continued their conversation without deigning to notice him.

He was a young man with whom our readers are already slightly acquainted. His baggage had come along to Cactus Fork and it was with a feeling of relief that he had once more rejoined it in spite of the dubious-looking company in which he found it.

The trio had not long been formed, and the young man certainly made no advances toward a closer acquaintance.

Small wonder, after he had once listened for ten minutes to the statements of Paddy the Wheeler.

"I'm goin' down to Black Dam, lookin' for a mon, d'yez moind? An' whin I foind him it's an illegant circus will there be. Dave wid the left hand, they call him, because he left his other hand somewhere behind him. He's death on rustlers, an' sure I'll be death on him. Didn't he kill poor Dandy Ed, ther bist mon, barrin' Paddy the Wheeler, that iver handled the tools? Och, sure, an' it war bluddy murther; an' fur that same I'm goin' ter git aven, ther murtherin' thafe av a far-downer!"

"He's a bad man, Paddy—the baddest I ever saw. If you let him git the drop on you, that fixes it. I saw him the time he dropped Billy Blue. Poor Billy was just havin' a leetle fun with a couple of Johns, an' when Dave heard the bones crack he up an' let drive with a derringer at short range, an' mashed the hull

back on his hand out. He never could hold a 'six' since."

"An' there warn't one av yez hed ther sand ter take it up fur Billy! Ef Oi hed—"

"Sand he blowed! He cleaned out ther rest ov the house about a minnit later. There was five stiff's afore you could count a hundred. You orter bin there."

"It's no good ter tell me that now. Whin Oi miss thim lively picnics, it on'y makes me fale bad to hear about 'em. Whin Oi'm around, it's a pile up ther ither way. Oi want wan shy at him, an' thin Dave Granger won't put no more men in a box."

"Oh, you've got the sand fur him, an' I'm good fur somethin' at ther tail end."

"Fur him? By ther howly Moses, Oi'm good fur a dozen! Whin Oi tune up ther tubes it'll do yez swate ter hear me play 'By, Baby, By,' an' iv'ry note a corpse dhroppin'. Whin Oi cut loose, Oi jest wade, wade, WADE in blud—Ah!"

"Down brakes and hands up!"

Just as Paddy the Wheeler's voice had risen to a ferocious yell, sharp and clear rung out the order which required no particular experience in the ways of the wild and woolly West to interpret.

There was a halt, so sudden that the two toughs were almost thrown into Thaddeus Rousveldt's lap, while the shakily stage gave a groan as though dissolution was approaching.

If Paddy the Wheeler wanted a chance to show what he could do with a dozen, the chance was right here now; and young Rousveldt naturally looked at that desperate fighter to see how he would begin.

"Sure, it's ther agents!" exclaimed the Wheeler, in anything but a bellicose tone. "Ef they know Oi'm here, Oi'm a did man. Howld yer whist, Jack, an' give 'em phat ye hev wil-out a wurrd. Mebbe they'll be contint wid slaughterin' ther young man, an' let us go on in pace."

After the late vamping, this "let down" was ludicrous enough; but there was little time to laugh. There had been a very brief parley with the driver, and now the agents—or three of them, at least—appeared at the door of the coach.

"No nonsense here," said the leader, sharply. "We have this gang down fine, and if there's any foolishness with fire-arms and the like, we'll get away with it so quick it will make your head swim! Paddy the Wheeler, you and your pard Jack just roll out of this, and stand over there by the roadside, where Number Three can cover you while we attend to young Mr. Rousveldt. He's just from the East, we understand, and I guess he has more sand and coin than a jail-full of fellows like you. Jump, there! Our tools are double-action, and liable to go off without much warning."

"W'd yez kill us entirely thin? whin it's not resistin' we are at tall, at tall? Be aizey, jontlemen, an' we'll be there, all both to wonst. Me hands are up, an' me pockets impty."

Paddy rose up in such eager haste that he immediately sat down again, his head having come against the roof of the coach with a whack that made Rousveldt's skull ache to hear. Then, lest the delay might seem a willful disobedience of orders, he flung himself out with a haste that sent him sprawling. At a more dignified rate of speed he was followed by his pard, who said nothing, and kept his wits about him.

A road-agent with a revolver in either hand kept them covered, while the others turned their attention to the young New Yorker.

"Mr. Rousveldt, I believe," said the leader, politely touching his hat. "You have doubtless been sufficiently well posted to understand the meaning of all this so that explanations are entirely unnecessary. I am taking some personal risk, of course, but I do not believe you an idiot enough to shoot. If you should be possessed of that folly mention the size of your grave, to save trouble hereafter, and then begin."

"Really, I haven't, ah, the slightest intention of offering any resistance. Indeed I am not prepared for it. I have not as much money about me, probably, as you expect, but, ah, the ease with which it is obtained ought to be taken into consideration, ah. With such plunder every day, ah, in course of time you ought to grow enormously rich."

"You have an exceedingly level head, and understand the situation to a dot. Please step down and out!"

The very pleasant invitation was one that it was not prudent to ignore. Without the least hesitation the young man scrambled down.

"Now, stand there, you. As your baggage would not be of the least use in Black Dam without its owner we propose to unload it. Should there be any mistake in our selections we hope that you will notify us, at once. We have always been very particular to avoid mistakes, and could not sacrifice our reputation for the sake of a trunk or two."

It seemed rather strange to Rousveldt, for in all that he had heard or read about the knights of the snaffle they had been content with receiving the sum total of the cash in the cargo, and held the baggage sacred, unless there was reason

to believe that it contained some coin that a search might develop.

He did not attempt to expostulate, but silently watched his trunks being unloaded. The boxes were shoved aside with careless contempt.

"Stand where you are," the leader said, when satisfied that he had what he was after, "and you, Wheeler and Jack, just climb into that hearse without a word. I'm rather aching to take a shy at two such rascals you are; but it might not be according to Gunter, after you've held your hands up. I'm aware that there's only ten dollars between you, and I wouldn't dirty my fingers with it. Now, Mike, be off with you. If these fellows say a word about road agents this side of Black Dam, the next time you come this way let us know—we'll stop you to hear the news. If they do I'll kill them both if I have to chase them for a year. So long."

Mike, at the permission, kicked off his brakes and cracked his whip. The two redoubtable heroes did not say a word, and the stage rolled away, leaving Thaddeus Rousveldt to stand in the midst of the road-agents with a dazed and troubled look upon his face.

Were these the men he had seen the day before; or were the woods full of different gangs? He could not recognize any of them; and the words of their leader gave him no clew.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DROPPING TO DEATH.

PROBABLY Rousveldt had made some allowance for braggadocio in estimating the qualities of his late traveling companions, but he had not been prepared for the utter meekness with which they received the taunts of the chief of the outlaws. Not that he regretted it. Never before had he realized the disadvantage at which passengers were held when attacked in a coach—even if the driver had nerve enough to attempt to go through with a rush. The frail sides offered no protection; while, for effective resistance, a passenger had to present his face for an elegant mark.

Nevertheless he had nerved himself for whatever might come; and the result was so different from what he expected that for a time he was really confused. The voice of the outlaw, which had lost its tone of banter, and was now sharp and firm, aroused him to his senses.

"So far you have acted like a little man of sense, and I hope we are not going to have any trouble with you when we come down to the real business part of the affair. Of course a young man worth half a million can hardly expect to get off for a paltry two hundred dollars and a gold watch. Providentially your credit is good—with some other people—and your own sense of justice ought to be sufficient to make you properly indemnify us for our time and risk."

"Ah, who has been posting you in regard to my affairs, ah? I certainly did not suppose there was a soul in New York who knew that I had come. Since I came, ah, to this demmed country I haven't been shouting my affairs from the stage-top. Are you sure, ah, that you hev'n't made a demmed mistake, ah?"

"Just so sure that I'll wager you five thousand dollars that you won't be found some day next week, lying by the side of the trail with your throat cut from ear to ear—which positively will happen if it is proved otherwise. You understand me, I hope. Five thousand dollars must we have from you, and that before the close of next week. If we don't have it down on the nail when the time is up, so will you be—up the flume. Meanwhile we will take very good care of you, and if your philosophy don't play out when put to the pinch I don't see why you shouldn't enjoy yourself clear up to the nines."

"Then, ah, you may just as well do the entire job at once. In a month, ah, it might be possible to raise such an amount; not in a week."

"Don't be foolish. We have more extensive business methods than you dream of, and, with your signature, can obtain that amount without the least trouble. The only question is, whether we ought not to double it. If it was not that we fear Black Dam would kick at our having too much of its capital withdrawn at short notice we would not let you off so easily. Yonder is a horse which the sooner you get up and mount the sooner our respect for you will get back to its normal condition."

The threat was enforced by a threatening motion of the leader's hand to the revolver most convenient, but young Rousveldt did not show much alacrity, under the circumstances. He had seated himself obstinately by the roadside, and evidently thought that if the remaining week of his life was to be spent in the company of road-agents and mountain bandits, it was hardly worth preserving anyhow. And if they hoped to get five thousand dollars out of him, they would hardly proceed to fatal extremities.

That idea may have shown itself in his countenance as he looked up in the eyes of the masked leader, and then at the other outlaws, whose faces were undisguised and exposed to view.

"I understand. We're not going to kill the

goose of the golden eggs. Egg-sactly. But we may take a leg off. It wouldn't hurt our prospects if we sent your ears in for identification. Don't try to force us to extremities, for I assure you that you will be the only sufferer by it."

"Evidently a man of sense, ah, and fertile of demmed expedients," said Mr. Rousveldt, a little ruefully, as he slowly arose. "Bring on your Bucephalus; I can't ride anyway, but I'd sooner have, ah, my neck broken than lose my ears."

"We will risk that, my festive friend. Our pupils don't generally tumble off."

There was reason in the statement, as Thaddeus soon discovered.

When he had gingerly mounted the steed, and was holding on by horn and crupper, without ever attempting to grasp the reins, restive though the animal appeared to be, a few twists of a rope from ankle to ankle girthed him so firmly in his seat that there was little danger of tumbling unless the saddle turned. In that case he would still go with the horse.

"Pity your early education has been so neglected; but safety must be put before comfort. You can tell your friends, when you go back, that a man that can't ride or shoot has no business West. Now, then, forward, all. Tomasso, I will hold you responsible for his safe-keeping. I will see you all shortly."

He threw himself on his own mustang as he ceased speaking, and waving his hand, dashed off in the direction whence the stage had come, leaving Mr. Rousveldt to plod along in the company of his keepers, who said nothing to him, nor to one another.

The little party turned shortly to the right, and leaving the trail behind them, began to ascend the rising ground that led away toward the mountain chain now in their front.

If Rousveldt said nothing his wits were at work. He was satisfied that he was in very bad hands, and yet was not without hope for the future. The chief of the outlaws was a very different man from his followers. Though his face was masked and his voice disguised, it was not hard to tell that he was something above the rough and tough element he had to do his bidding. They were evidently reckless beyond hope of pardon, while their leader had his reasons for not wishing his face to be seen. What were they unless that he made his appearance in the neighboring towns and hitherto without suspicion? Already Thaddeus was trying to evolve a scheme of far-reaching vengeance for the outrages of this and the previous day.

Having once come to this decision he looked up cheerfully, and examined his escort with a more critical eye.

They resembled Paddy the Wheeler very much with the exception of his own peculiar escort, Tomasso, who was a dark-visaged Mexican.

The ascent became more precipitous as they advanced, and before long they were in a mountain path, narrow and none too often trodden.

The animal he bestrode seemed to be a good one, free of motion and obedient to the bit. With a fair start it might do a little more than hold its own, and Rousveldt was wide awake to accept any chance. If he had been better acquainted with the men and the country he would hardly have looked for one, even with the faint hope that possessed him.

They went onward and upward. Through the clear mountain air the clink of the horse's hoofs sounded with wonderful distinctness, and a voice raised even in ordinary conversation would have been audible at a great distance. The men were either silent or conversed in whispers.

The path they followed seemed to be a natural roadway, somewhat difficult, yet not altogether dangerous. As well as he could judge its trend was away from Black Dam, though there was no telling how soon it might take a turn.

The hands of the prisoner had been left free, and though Tomasso kept a close eye on him there did not seem to be much danger that he would or could attempt any change in the programme.

Nevertheless the young man was not as submissive as he looked. He had not been by any means satisfied with the figure he had cut, and he was willing to seize a chance if it presented itself. Suddenly he came to the front in a new shape.

His quick eye noted that while the narrow roadway they were following led up almost in a straight line, to the left a defile opened that looked as though it might be practicable.

Several of the outlaws were before him, as an advance guard. Behind him came Tomasso, and the rest in the rear, in single file.

How it happened was not so clear, but one moment they were riding along one behind the other, the next, young Rousveldt had stooped in the saddle and with a knife slashed through the girth that bound his ankles, even while he wheeled his horse to the left and urged it at break-neck speed up the narrow gully.

Where it led to he had no idea, but there were a few footprints faintly visible here and there, which showed that it had already been traversed by horsemen; and as it turned sharply at a little distance it offered him the advantage of being soon lost to view, if he could, in the first moments of surprise, gain a little start.

Perhaps the New Yorker could not ride; but he handled his horse wonderfully well for an amateur, and from his very first movement toward escape sent it along at a pace that was unexpected even to himself.

So rapid was the movement that those in advance were not aware of it until they heard the exclamation of the Mexican, as he turned and dashed up the difficult trail.

Before he had gone a dozen steps he had his revolver in his hand; but he refrained from shooting. His prisoner was wanted alive, not dead. For the rest, they could not aim except through Tomasso; and they waited; though a wild shout arose, as Rousveldt dashed around the bend in the gulch.

"Halt, senior, for the love of Heaven, halt!" yelled the Mexican, driving in his spurs at almost every word. "Halt, or you are a dead man."

Rousveldt heard the words, but in a confused way, and cared little to consider their meaning. Up the defile he urged his steed.

Again there was a curve of the narrowing walls.

And then—his horse sprung out into nothingness, and the fugitive felt himself falling, falling.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BLACK TIGER.

THINGS quieted down at Black Dam, and the balance of the night was spent without any further alarm. The Rands resigned themselves to waiting until daylight before making any further efforts to find out what had become of Helen Harcourt, and by that time they were able to take a cooler view of the matter.

Miss Belle recognized the fact that there had been something about her *protegee* that indicated an unsettled purpose, and that while it was possible that something had happened to her, it was about as likely that she had vanished of her own free will and accord. As Mr. Rand had heard that Pocket Pete and others, who better understood the ways and wiles of Black Dam, were making inquiries, the two decided to quietly await their result before making any other efforts to solve the mystery.

They slept well into the morning and the rest of the boarders had breakfasted and gone about their business when they came to their morning meal. After satisfying their rather ravenous appetite they started out on the porch, and found that the camp was wonderfully quiet. Few people were in sight, and they of the most peaceable-looking description.

A brief survey of the street satisfied Mr. Rand. He turned and went into the Colonnade, leaving Miss Belle to take a longer and a more interested view of the semi-savage town in which she found herself. She had seen just such places by the dozen, as she journeyed, and as often had shuddered at the sight. She might have seen worse looking hovels, and harder looking denizens, among the rookeries of New York, but she had never visited them. This nearest approach to seeming squalor was in the nature of a sensation.

A clatter of hoofs caused her to turn her head and look a little anxiously in the direction of the sound.

It was caused by a loose horse, that dashed out from the rear of the hotel, and went tearing down the street at a great rate; but as Miss Belle was a special admirer of the equine race, and this was a remarkably fine specimen, her attention was concentrated.

It was a magnificent coal-black; clean-limbed and symmetrical, that arched its neck, tossed its mane, and neighed loudly.

"Thunder an' blazes!" exclaimed a voice at Miss Belle's shoulder, "ef it ain't ther jedge's 'Black Tiger!' Ther'll be lively times in this hyer camp, a-ketchin' ov him. Who in thunder turned him loose?"

Miss Rand wheeled at the voice, and found herself facing Jerry Tucker, the proprietor of the Colonnade, whom she knew, at least by sight.

"A very fine looking animal," she said, with a smile, "but he looks as though he might have a decided objection to being caught."

"Caught, thunder! Ther last time he got loose it took six men a week to loop him, an' they wouldn't 'a' got him then ef they hadn't 'a' run him inter a pocket, an' got ther dead medecin' on him that 'ere way. Next time he'll have more sense, an' they can't run him down in a month."

"Did I not understand you to say that he belonged to Judge Brandt? I should not think, from what I saw of him, that he would take much delight in such a belligerent beast. From looks I should say that it would take the strong arm of a practiced rider to manage him."

"Right you are, an' ther jedge never put leg acrost him, sence he had him. Yer see he drawed him on a hand ov bluff, an' he played five hundred good dollars ag'in him, an' he's kept him 'cause he war wuth too much ter sell, an' too purty to give away. He wouldn't try ter ride him if you'd pile up another five hundred alongside ov what he put up fur him. Ter tell ther

truth I'm thinkin' ther jedge is a bit skeered ov hosses anyway; an' this is a bit ahead ov most men's time."

"What's that you were saying?"

A tall, well-built, gentlemanly looking man stepped forward from the doorway, where he had been standing long enough to hear the concluding sentence.

In a few words Tucker repeated his information, closing just as a clatter of hoofs showed that the black was returning.

"Ah! So it belongs to Bailey, does it? He always was the man for white elephants—though this is a horse of another color. As usual I will have to help him out."

Bart Brandt ran gracefully down and out toward the middle of the trail, while the black, which showed a disposition to curvet up and down the town until fairly driven out, came fearlessly toward him. Man and brute were apparently well matched.

As, without the least symptom of a shy, Black Tiger was flying by, running low and level, Brandt's hand shot out and caught the little tuft of mane at the withers, while at the same time he was springing with the stride of the horse. Then, before Miss Rand could see how it was done he had swung himself up on the animal's back, and was being carried down the street at a great rate.

They shot out of sight at the turn some distance away; and the last thing Miss Belle saw of them, Black Tiger was still running true, while seated astride, his knees tightly gripping the glossy sides, his arms folded, Bart Brandt softly swayed to the motion of his steed.

"Cussed ef he don't lay over ther deck, savin' yer presence, miss," exclaimed Jerry enthusiastically. "Ther' ain't no greaser vaquero c'u'd 'a' did it better—er half so good. Tiger kin jest go now, tell he's ready ter drop, fur his own fun; an' then he'll go a few miles fur ther fun ov ther boss."

"But who is it?" asked Miss Belle, a little flush of enthusiasm on her face. The feat smacked of the circus, but while brilliant enough in a forty foot ring, with a horse specially trained for the act, here, under such different and difficult circumstances, it became even more.

"That's ther jedge's brother. Come ter town last night an' made hisself solid with the boys while the old man war prancin' over the Cactus Fork in the dark. 'Pears ter me he ain't so fur wrong, eh? A leetle more sport, an' a leetle less 'spectability makes things a heap pleasanter. An' outside on his int'rest in ther Short Ridge ther jedge ain't made much ov a stride fur wealth; while Bart's jest rollin' in coin."

Good-natured Tucker was not grinding an ax for any one, and but spoke from the fullness of his heart. Perhaps, too, he simply voiced the lady's private opinion. She smiled, nodded, and then glided into the hotel to find her father. The return of the victorious horse-tamer might be long delayed, and meantime her thoughts were busy with private affairs.

As she swept along she met a natty looking little man, who stepped with a nervous stride, and whose face was white and somewhat drawn. The form looked familiar, yet, until she had reached her father's room, Belle Rand had not recognized Cool Cal, the wounded fellow passenger of the day before.

Then the remembrance of him came to her suddenly. She could not but admire the nerve that kept him going, and spoke of him to her father.

"Going out!" he exclaimed. "How unfortunate. I have been waiting to tell you. He is in no fit condition for work, such as he has before him, and may die from the strain. He is the clew for us to follow, for in spite of his name he is Helen Harcourt's father. It is to search for her that he is leaving the bed, where he belongs. If there has been a hand raised against her, as I begin to believe, it will be sure to fall with as heavy a weight on him."

Miss Belle's face lost its careless expression at once.

"He! her husband! At least the man with whom she fled—and I will not believe that she would have gone with him save as his wife. I cannot believe it. He is too young a man."

"He is old enough to be Helen's father—and she may be seventeen."

"Then, the names! His is Barret, as you heard a dozen times."

"Here names count for nothing. You saw yourself that there was some mystery about the child. He may be Harcourt in one camp, Barret in another, and have names for a dozen more. There is one hopeful sign—though it is a sad one, too. She must, as you say, have been his wife or we would not find him burdened with the child. It is no slight incumbrance for a man that lives as he does, and had he been false to one he would have been false to both. No doubt, for the sake of the child, he will tell the truth, though I would hesitate to reveal all to him until I had studied his nature a little, and knew what was behind that icy visage."

"Why did you neglect to tell me all this when you learned it? There is no time to think now, to plan. We must act at once or he may be lost to us for good and all. Once men like to him

get out of sight you can expect them to vanish utterly."

"I did it for the best. This man called Pocket Pete promised me that he would do his best to find traces of the girl, and give me early intelligence. And he assured me that Barret was in no condition to leave his bed for the present."

"It is too late now to mourn over the mistake. If there is no one else here that we can trust we must go ourselves. He cannot have got far away. This Judge Brandt, in whose judgment you placed so much reliance, seems to have already disappeared. I wonder if we dare take his brother into our confidence? To me he looks in every way the better man."

"No, no. Not a word to him. There is bad blood between them—something about a game of cards, as I understand it. We can never successfully approach him through a direct enemy. I only wish the other man was out of the way. He is only a detrimental here—and from what I hear of him I am inclined to believe that he is a grand rascal anywhere."

"Just jet that down, purty, ez lein' true ez gospel. I said I'd bring you now, an' bring 'em I hev."

The interruption came from Pocket Pete, who slipped into the room in his usual independent way.

"It ain't every galoot ez could fix ther p'int down fine, fur I must say ther jot war done up brown, with lots ov gravy fur trimmin's; but thar ain't a doubt longer. When ther leetle dumb gal left me last night, she went in by one door, an' she went on out by another. An' ther wu'st ov it war she war kerried."

CHAPTER XXV.

RED MIKE TELLS HIS STORY.

THE speaker looked pleased at hearing Miss Belle's exclamation of surprise. She counted on causing something of a sensation, and was not disappointed.

"It war more ner I expected, but I struck ther tracks ov ther two men ez did it, jest outside. An' her feet never teched ther ground, I'll sw'ar ter that."

"Tell the rest some other time. Now, go quick and find her father, and tell him what you have learned."

"Beggin' yer pardon, miss, fur interruptin', but I did tell him, some time ago. He jest waited ter h'iste in some grub, an' now he's off on ther trail, pervidin' he hain't lost it a'ready. It ain't ther clearest line ter foller ez mou't be laid down."

"And you? Do you go with him?"

"You bet. I jest slipped in ter post yer all both. Now I'm off ter j'ine him. Ef he war strong ez usual, I reckon he wouldn't want me proddin' 'round in his affairs; but lein' ez he's liable ter fall by ther wayside ary minnit, he wants a reliable man 'long, an' that's me. So 'long. I'll see yer later; I can't tarry now."

Pocket Pete was in haste, and went without waiting for answer or message.

"Well," said Miss Belle, as she glanced after the retreating figure, "we can do nothing. Certainly we have accomplished as much as we could have hoped to do in the time. For the present it seems to be the part of prudence for us to say nothing to any one else, but to wait until we can hear more of Helen Harcourt or her father."

And so they waited, strolling casually through Black Dam, and gaining some information about that classic town and its outlying camps and mines.

How they occupied their time is hard to describe, but in one way or another it passed.

An hour or so after their late dinner there was a scurrying of hoofs in the street, and looking out they saw Bart Brandt had returned.

Black Tiger had plainly received a lesson, and had profited by it. His dark sides were reeking with sweat, and the fiery impatience had disappeared. Though his rider had neither rein nor whip, he seemed under full control, and no doubt answered to the pressure of Brandt's knees, since he turned in again, without hesitation, at the spot which hitherto he had fought so vigorously against approaching. A dozen men ran to see him walk quietly up to the lariat-rope from which he had broken, and the surprise at his utter subjection was universal.

"As good a piece of horseflesh as I ever threw a leg over," said Brandt, as he sprung lightly to the ground. "He needs work, though, and is hardly the animal for this kind of country. The mountain roads would soon knock a leg off. What's the use of a racer to a man like Bailey, anyhow? I'll have to try and trade him out of him. If he rides something a little slower, he will run less chance of getting his neck broken."

He gently caressed the neck of Black Tiger as he spoke, who whinnied kindly, and then pranced off to the other end of his rope. There was still plenty of go in him in spite of the hard pelt he had just taken; while Brandt strode away without a sign of fatigue, and without paying any attention to his admirers.

Jerry Tucker might have told how hearty was the meal that he ate, and that from the Colonnade he went to his brother's office, to which place he directed any inquiring souls to be forwarded.

Some time late in the afternoon a dilapidated vehicle, drawn by weary-looking steeds, made its appearance, and by the strange magnetism that under certain circumstances is always exercised, drew the crowd together again with additions and emendations.

When Paddy the Wheeler and his pard got down, it was as certain as could be that something serious had happened, not to mention the solemn story in the face of Red Mike, the driver.

"You look sad," said Jerry Tucker, coming down as much from curiosity as from habit. "Ef agents gin'rally hedn't too much sense ter stop sich a go cart ez this, I'd say you'd bin held up."

Mike did not answer until he had reached the perch, when he could look down on the greater part of his auditors.

"You should! Well, I'd smile ef yer weren't 'bout ez nigh ter ther bed-rock ov onadulterated truth ez you kin crawl. That's ther size ov it—a yard wide an' fast colors!"

"What's ther size ov it, Mickey, an' who yer talkin' to? Ef yer colors didn't run faster nor a bald-headed jack-rabbit, it war beka'se they weren't kerried whar they could hev a chance ter show they wouldn't wash. What would they be stoppin' this hearse fur, anyway?"

"Oh, dry up, Jerry Tucker! You'll joke 'round ther bizzness end ov a hornet, some day, till yer find it hot. I hed a cargo ov live stock ter-day, an' it war them that ther 'gents war after."

It was generally known that the opposition line got the pick of the passengers; while Mike drove, as it were, a sort of mixed train, that served as a local accommodation—the bulk end of his profits, such as they were, coming from the freight he carried.

As Paddy the Wheeler and his pard had gone on into the Colonnade, the landlord could indulge in a little banter, and so discount the effect of his story.

Red Mike was no favorite with Jerry Tucker, even though Judge Brandt was supposed to have a big interest in the line.

"Ef they got 'em," he answered, with seeming concern, "I don't think it war ther part ov a gentleman an' a scholar ter onload 'em on me, when yer knowed they couldn't pay the'r bill. Mebbe you're backin' 'em up."

"Oh, hold yer hush! Paddy the Wheeler kin talk fur himself, an' that pard ov hissen be a mighty bad man. Ef you don't want 'em, tell 'em so, an' mebbe you won't hear 'em talk—oh, no!—ef ye'r deaf."

The crowd had smiled with the landlord; it snorted now with Red Mike. Paddy the Wheeler looked to be a man that *would* talk, and perhaps do more; while Jerry had a wholesome aversion to a brawl, though willing to fight if put in a corner.

"You strike ther truth, gents; I see that," he continued. "They're holy terrors, an' ther agents didn't dar' ter fool 'round them. But there war another trav'ler—a poor shote ov a tenderfoot, from 'way back East—thet hed ther coin, an' him they jest gobbled, horns, hide, taller an' all. They took him an' his trunks; an' you'll hear ther rest ov ther story from them, I reckon. Ef he's got ary friends hyar, they kin perpare ter shell out, ef they don't want him made cold meat on."

"What's that?" said Tucker, more sharply than usual. "Was there a fight?"

"Nary a fight. I opine they was afeard ther' moutn be one so they laid off at a distance an' told the young man ter step down, an' down he stepped. It warn't wuth while ter tell him not ter do it, an' you bet we didn't."

"An' what they goin' ter do with him?"

"Ef I tole yer, I calkerlate they are goin' ter make coin or sculps outen him; and Black Dam, er thim in it, 'll hev ther chance ter say wick."

"But who was the young man; what was he doing here; why did they select *him* for a victim?"

Another questioner came forward. Solon Rand and his daughter had been interested even though disgusted listeners to the dialogue. Now, impelled by a strange fancy of Miss Belle, he sought for more explicit data.

"D'yer think they'd take me?" answered Red Mike, with a look of scorn. "Do I look ez though I hed friends ez could pony up five thousand? If I does yer kin buy me out fur half price an' not make much ov a barg'in. An' ez fur ther name ov ther victim—I seen it chalked in big letters on his trunks, an' I jest totted it down. It war 'Mr. Thaddeus Rousveldt, New York City.' Friend ov yours, eh?"

Belle Rand gave a little cry of dismay. Cool though she ordinarily was, and brave to face dangers in the line of her duty, this was a surprise as disagreeable as she could have well met with. The name was very well known to her—she had mentioned it, the previous evening in the conversation with her father, before taking to the moonlight ramble—and if young Mr. Rousveldt had attempted to come to Black Dam she thought she knew of the one magnet that could have drawn him thitherward.

Red Mike heard the cry and guessed at its cause.

He looked up with an ugly sort of a gleam in his eye.

"Friend ov yours, miss? Seems ter strike yer harder then ther old man. Mighty bad fur him, ef, betwixt yer, yer don't do suthin' fur him, sharp. I never knowed a wuss gang. They send in a ear er two ef friends don't shell out. Then, by an' by, kims a arm er leg—"

Red Mike's suggestions were suddenly broken off. As Miss Rand drew back in disgust a hand fell heavily on the stage-driver's shoulder.

In a moment he knew it was no ordinary hand. The fingers began to sink into the flesh as it pressed him downward, and before he well knew what had happened to him he uttered a howl of pain, and sunk to his knees upon the porch.

"Now, if this lady wishes any information you will furnish it in a more acceptable style or the company will be under the necessity of procuring a new driver. Your chaff will do well enough with Tucker, but it won't go down with me. No, you needn't get up until the young lady is done with you."

Red Mike's look was too pained to be fierce, but he glared up over his shoulder, as wrathful as his scattered senses would permit him to be.

One glance, however, was sufficient.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Brandt. I didn't mean no harm; but when a feller's had fun poked at him by the bushel he thinks everybody's tryin' ter make a fool ov him."

"Please, let him go," interposed Belle. "I did not mind his insolence, and we have heard all that was necessary for us to know. I have nothing to ask him. Though we have to take counsel with some one wiser than ourselves in regard to what is best to be done, I do not doubt but that the young man is one of our friends. If so of course we must not forsake him."

"You hear, Mike? You can retire," said Brandt, allowing the driver to rise to his feet and slink away. Then he turned to Miss Rand.

"If in any way I can be of any service to you command me. What I do not know about the ways of the West is hardly worth finding out, and I think my assistance is worth something. Your father will find me here or at my brother's office. My name is Brandt."

Then he bowed and walked off, wending his way into the midst of the group that now surrounded Paddy the Wheeler and his pard.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN INKLING OF A GAME FOR BIG STAKES.

THE few words said by Bart Brandt produced a decidedly favorable impression on Miss Belle. She liked the tone of his voice, admired the skill and strength with which he could manage a fractious horse or a fractious man, and said to herself that however public opinion might run, she preferred him to his brother, the judge.

Still, there was a very wide difference between thinking all that and being willing to take him for a mentor, and she knew that her father's prejudices were strongly against it.

"Do you believe this story?" she asked, when they were once alone.

"I am afraid that it is only too true."

"What then do you think is best to be done?"

"As far as I can see there is nothing to be done, except to hold ourselves in readiness."

"What, when we know that a friend of ours is in danger?"

"We do not know it, officially. Supposing all that ruffianly driver said was the truth we can make no movement until we learn the will of the bandits. You don't suppose they are still standing in the road where we left them?"

"No. Of course not, but they can be followed and found. Do you intend to tamely submit to such an extortion? For my part I think they should be fought with their own weapons. Five thousand dollars ought to go far toward the extermination of the whole gang."

"Those are questions for Mr. Rousveldt to determine. You seem to forget that he is the person in danger; and certainly he is the one to decide on what course to pursue. He is abundantly able to pay for his amusement, and he might suspect that in an extermination he would go up along with the rest."

"Very true; and yet one hates to be beaten."

"I do not see that we are to be the sufferers; and I can't see why I should be called upon to pit myself against a gang that has evidently been able to hold its own against men of a great deal more caliber than I claim to possess."

"I can't argue with you; but I feel the other way. Let us at least ask the opinion of some more experienced head. This Brandt, with whom through his brother I begin to feel more or less acquainted, offered his services in any way. How would it be to speak to him?"

"Excuse me, there is nothing like keeping one's eye on the main point. We are here to find your sister, and to do that the less we have to say to the judge's brother the better, until this matter between him an' the ostensible father of Helen Harcourt is explained. Whether that caution applies to the judge himself I am not so sure."

"Who can we trust, then? Though you had never sounded him, yet up to last night you built nearly all your hopes on this Judge Brandt,

to whom your correspondents had given you letters of introduction. We met him *en route* and were favorably impressed. You have been waiting here all day to see him; though if he were here now you would hesitate about trusting him with our story."

"You go a little too far. I can't say that I built much hope on Judge Brandt—or any other man, since I never had much to build; but I did think he would be able to advise us what was best for us to do, to make a fair trial. Now I have more hope and less trust. If we must say anything at all I believe I would sooner try that one-armed Granger."

"Ah, perhaps you are right. Have you seen him to-day?"

"No. He has affairs of his own, and has been out of town."

"Then he is something more than a roving sport and desperado. I thought so, and yet, from what little information I could gain, his status hardly rose higher than that of Pocket Pete and that other outsider, old White."

"A one-armed gambler! Hardly. It takes two hands, and very nimble ones at that, to enable a man to hold his own at that profession. Not but what as an amateur he has an enviable reputation. In an honest game he is no doubt as good as the best. My impression is that he is seeking an investment; and he has gone with a man named Green to look at a possible venture. When he returns I think I shall sound him."

"Remember that he probably knows whatever Pocket Pete does, and that seems to be a good deal."

"Very true—though the men are not partners. Well, to-night will be time enough, unless meanwhile we hear something from our friend, young Rousveldt. Of course we *must* do our very best for him. It is on your account that he has got himself into this trouble, and you may as well recognize the fact at first as at last. Confound him, he is just fool enough to enjoy the sensation his adventure will create when his mother and her set hear of it—though I am afraid they will think it very ungrateful if you don't look at him with a more favoring eye."

"I am sure I have treated Mr. Rousveldt as well as I could without becoming sentimental about him. He wants to marry me and I don't want to marry him. That is a plain solution; but as you know the facts I don't see that there is anything unwomanly in repeating it to my father. As a friend I admire him very much, and I am sure there is very much about him that is worthy of it. If he is not utterly spoiled it is not his mother's fault. Many—perhaps most—young men under the same want of training would have been."

"Very true, very true. But we don't want him, do we? We don't want any one. I am not going to be a cruel parent; but the truth is I consented to this trip in the hope that when you got your mind at rest about this half-sister of yours, who, of course, is nothing more than any other woman to me, and is little more than a dream to you, that you and I could settle down to a few years of quiet enjoyment. You are all that I have, and I don't want to lose you. Confound it! what good will thousands do an old man like me if he is all alone in the world?"

Solon Rand looked very lovingly at his daughter. He had been a sober prosaic business man, who had married a widow lady, without feeling sentimental over her, though they had lived happily together. He had regretted her death; but it is a question if he did not regret still more the revelations that followed it, when her will, and the will of her first husband, were brought to light. Not that he cared for the difference of a hundred thousand or so. He had made his fortune and could spare all that he had been accustomed to look at as belonging to his wife; but Belle had taken it into her head that the half-sister whose very existence she had forgotten, must be hunted up, and evidently there was to be no rest for either of them until that end had been attained.

It had been a blind sort of a search, and the detectives they had consulted did not give them much hope of being able to find the trail after the lapse of so many years, though they did put them on the track of several men who long ago had brought handsome wives from the East and all that. But in none of these stories had the name of Harcourt figured. The chance that had led them to Black Dam had not originally included the dumb girl, whose striking resemblance to Belle seemed to promise so much.

And now the two were not only compelled to wait as regards their special quest, but here was the complication in regard to young Rousveldt—about whom enough has been said to give the reader a fair inkling in regard to who and what he was.

So much for father and daughter.

If Bart Brandt was listening to hear if Paddy the Wheeler and his pard were making any statements which might be objectionable to Miss Rand he could have spared himself the trouble. Paddy was apparently in blissful ignorance in regard to who Rousveldt's friends might be, and he did not trouble himself at all about them. His history of the affair resembled Red Mike's—al-

lowing for natural variations—and he kept very quiet about the nature of the business that heretofore he had announced as calling him to Black Dam. Perhaps this silence was the more ominous.

In a few moments' conversation with a bystander Brandt had heard the gist of all that the Wheeler had said. Then, happening to come face to face with Red Mike, he led that worthy into a corner.

The driver was either for giving, or he did not deem it advisable to show temper. There was no trace of anger about him as he respectfully listened and answered the questions that Bart Brandt put to him.

While they were talking a man came out of the crowd and passed near them.

"Meet me in the office," he said; and without waiting for a response was gone.

Brandt looked after him a little doubtfully.

"Who is it?" he said.

"Mart Lane, an' I reckon one ov yer big brother's friends. I've seen 'em together afore now. You'd better listen to him. He never speaks but what he says somethin'."

"Some more of the old boy's business. If he never comes back I'll soon be ready to run things here. To-morrow I think I'll go out to the Short Ridge and see how the land lays there."

"Mebbe ther jedge ain't thinkin' ov comin' back—not right away. He couldn't hev a better man ter step inter his shoes; an' he's jest throwed away in Black Dam. Could yer in-doose him?"

Bart Brandt caught the innuendo in his tone, and raised his clinched hand.

"Curse you, none of that. I've been a bit of a sport in my time, but no man can say I ever threw off on a sucker that asked me to bet his chips; and I'd hardly begin with Bailey. None of that, I say, or I'll kill you. I may joke, but I don't want to hear any serious villainy from you. Keep a quiet tongue in your head, and don't pose for a hero or I'll tell all hands what precious cowards you three were."

He strode carelessly away, leaving Red Mike with a puzzled look on his face.

Mart Lane was waiting at the office.

"I was to report to you," he said. "That was all the jedge said, and he hadn't hardly time for that. Of course you're to keep quiet about it, for there would be a howl if the boys knew what dirty work I was doing. You know what you want to hear?"

"Precisely. As I understand it—if you are Mart Lane—your room adjoins that of certain friends of mine, and as the partitions are not overly thick, and our friends not overly cautious, it is supposed that you overheard the greater portion of their conversation. Spit it out."

"That makes it all right, so here goes."

Briefly Mart Lane gave a summary of the talk between Belle and her father, and added:

"The big point that I see is about the Short Ridge?"

"The Short Ridge?" repeated Bart, as though uncertain what the other was aiming at.

"Yes, the Short Ridge. I've knowed a dum fool to drop a chunk of wisdom, and this stranger let out a heap more than he knew. If One-Armed Dave is backing Hank Green the condemned old hummer may give a heap of trouble. If I were you I'd send over to the Fork and get the jedge lack hereaways as fast as he can come. There's a show for a fight, and he'd better be around."

"Oh, say, what is this you're giving me? Any trouble on board? I don't understand."

"It's jest this. The Short Ridge lays over a corner of a claim that Green staked off considerably previous, and then Seth Rogers and his pard lapped 'em both. Rogers has worked over into the Short Ridge without sayin' a word, and I'll bet a big apple—which I ain't seen one in ten year—that Green, who kept his claim alive, working in the far end, has got the one-armed man and Rogers in cahoots, and they are going to bust in on the Short Ridge. They'll make a bad team if they all pull on the same hearse."

"You know a thundering sight," said Brandt, sharply. "How does it come that Bailey wasn't fly to all this? Don't you suppose he'd have looked it all up, long ago, and been ready for any such infernal sharp work?"

"He might have, but I don't believe he knows it—or any three men in camp. There's been a change in the district since Green struck the spot, and the judge wouldn't find the record. I wouldn't have thought of it maybe if I hadn't been trying to figger out what brought Dave Granger here. It's been mighty quiet play, and I don't believe it will win; but for all that I say bring the judge back soon as you can."

"It may be so, and I'll send for him; but we've got the money, muscle and brains; and if we don't win it will be a caution. If that's your game, Mister Dave Granger, look out for yourself."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A BIG SURPRISE.

"EITHER you will have to go, or you will have to get a good man, that can be relied on to make the trip."

Bart Brandt was waiting up and down the floor of the office, in more excitement than the bad man from 'way back usually allowed him-

self to exhibit. His listener was Ready Rube, who opportunely turned up just after Mart Lane had left.

Without giving any hint of how he had received the information, Brandt took him at once into counsel.

And Ready Rube, perhaps partly urged by his hatred of Granger, was inclined to give credence to the idea, and advised that the judge be sent for at once.

If anything should turn up, meanwhile, it was necessary for him to be there to manage the men at the Short Ridge. He did not feel justified in leaving his charge just then, even if ordered to do so by Bart Brandt. There was a limit to his authority; and in a case like this the boss himself was needed badly, to look after his interests. They were still an unknown quantity; but they might reach millions."

"I ain't goin'," was Rube's positive answer. "Ef there's ter be a row you kin bet I'm wanted hyar, ter hev a hand in it; an' I've got a kettie evenin' up ez I'm in town fur anyhow. But I kin send Lem Lewis, a man ez kin make ther rattle ez quick ez any two-legged galoot on airth. Jot down what yer want him ter know, an' I'll hev him on the road afore an hour."

"If you can trust him to go through it will be better perhaps. Your men know you, and you know them. If he uses horseflesh for what it is worth he ought to bring Bailey here some time to-morrow."

"Yes, if he's at the Fork. I'll put a stake on it, big. Don't lose no more time gassin' but lay out what yer want. Write it down an' then ther won't be no mistake."

In haste the letter was indited. Then, as Ready Rube was about to depart, he hesitated a moment.

"An', say, we'd better tell him ter say to ther ole man that ef any ov ther gang, from Double-Shot Dave down ter Hank Green, exposes hisself ter infection he'll ketch his mortal sickness so quick it'll make his head swim."

"What's the use of that? Do you suppose Bailey thinks I'm a fool? He will count on my doing for him all that can be done, and then keeping my mouth shut about it afterward."

"That's ther line yer on, is it? All right. Less yer say ther better. But it 'pears ter me ther's a heap o' confidence started a-goin', in a mighty sudden way. Ef ther jedge thinks ez much ov you ez you do ov him he's a queer way o' showin' it."

"I haven't a bonanza on hand—a million in sight and the turn to hear from. Get out of this if you're going. If you're not I'd better cut your throat and look for another man with more jump in his heels."

Bart Brandt spoke with a snarl, and there was a glitter in his eye that made Rube believe that he more than half-meant what he said. He made no answer, but ducked his head and went off to find his messenger.

Of course his man was one of the gang at the Short Ridge, that he could, and Judge Brandt would, trust. As there were no explanations necessary with him it was only a few moments after the order was given that the messenger was in the saddle, and his face turned toward Cactus Fork.

Then Rube looked around the mine; had a brief talk with the boys; posted a set of guards; and came back to Black Dam.

Promptly as he acted all through of course some time was consumed, and it was well along in the evening when he strolled into the Emporium.

After the affair of the previous evening he knew that he risked a row going there; but at the same time it was the head-quarters for information, and the most likely place for meeting either Pocket Peto or Dave Granger. Against the one he had sworn vengeance—to be executed when he got a comfortable drop on him—and against the other his interests prompted him.

How he should proceed, and when, he had not decided. Circumstances must offer the excuse, and they must be so bent as to leave him on the safe side, for he knew pretty well that with men like the two he was after it was most likely not to be a word and a blow, but a shot first and no words at all.

He found there Bart Brandt, who simply nodded in a cold sort of way, he responding in kind. That was enough to show the men of Black Dam that, while the hatchet had been buried, and there was no great danger of any circus, the two were none too cordial. No one suspected the confidential relations that had been established, but if any thought at all over the subject, the supposition was that the boss of the Short Ridge did not care to continue a quarrel with the judge's brother.

This reason would not have applied to Pocket Peto, but unfortunately for the prospects for "fun" he was not there—and Rube did not seem to be looking for him, either. He entered quietly, passed Bart Brandt with the nod mentioned, and taking his seat at one side, looked around him in a lazy, listless sort of way, listening to such conversation as was going on near him, without attempting to join in.

There were a couple of strangers whom he did not remember to have heretofore seen; and some

time after his entrance he became interested in what they said, and in the effect produced. Bart Brandt fixed his attention more thoroughly by a few words he let fall:

"You men may think that it's none of your funeral, and maybe you're right, but that wasn't the way we looked at it down our way. When the read-agents broke out near a town there wasn't much foolishness about them, but every time they drew they fired—when they struck a lick it counted. At last, when we found they never made mistakes, we got to looking nearer home. Blame me if we didn't get the dead medicine on them right away. There was one of the gang in camp picking up points. If you keep your eyes open you'll find it's going to be the same way here."

"An' yer think there's an angel ov that kind in this hyar lurg, right now?"

A prominent citizen with a red nose asked the question in a tone of horror, that caused a laugh at his expense.

"I can't say yea or nay to that; but it's worth looking after. If you get your eyes on the right man it won't be hard to trail him down. He has to meet his pards to post them; and if you're as lucky as we were you might corral the whole bunch."

"Pears ter me that kinder s'picion 'd make it mighty rough fur strangers; an' I don't see that ther agents kin do us much hurt, ez long ez we've got nothin' ter lose."

Hank Green as usual was hanging around the place during the evening, and had to have his say wherever he saw an opening.

"Oh, that's all right. If you want to have them keep them. I don't know what I might do if they mounted me in a stage, with no show for my white alley; but as I never travel that way, and the man that can get the drop on me when I'm on horseback is welcome to use it for what it is worth, I'm not caring whether the agents keep school or not."

What further Brandt might be about to say was suddenly cut short.

Outside they heard the clatter of the hoofs of a horse at full speed, which then stopped suddenly in front of the door, and the next minute a man rushed in, exclaiming:

"Is Bart Brandt hyer? Ef so I've got a letter fur him. Ther yer deuce and all's ter pay, an' thar's no pitch hot!"

"I'm the individual inflicted with that name," said Brandt, starting up and forward. "What do you want with me?"

"Hyar's yer letter; an' while ye'r readin' it I'll tell ther crowd what's ther matter with me. Jimmy, give me five fingers of Red Eye."

Bart Brandt snatched the letter and eagerly tore it open, never noting the strange surprise on the face of Ready Rube, who sprung forward and clapped his hand with a fierce grasp on the shoulder of Lem Lewis.

"Is this ther way ter Cactus Fork?" he hissed into his ear. "I thort I could trust yer. You've failed me, an' by ther holy—"

"Go slow, Rube, an' learn ter peddle," answered Lewis coolly. "That were a blind lead yer set me workin' on. Yer wouldn't hev me butt my brains out ag'in' ther lersin' when ther true vein led t'other way. Gentlemen, read-agents are a-gettin' thick ez Smiths in purgatory. I've bin held up."

A snarling curse came from Brandt and he caught the messenger by the other shoulder.

"What is the meaning of this? Who are you? By heavens, if you are in league with the scoundrels I'll begin my answer by spattering Jim Burke's bar."

"Oh, I'm all right, ez Ready Rube, hyer, kin tell you. I'm from the Short Ridge, an' ef ye'll let me chuck down my rashun of benzine I'll give it to yer straight."

"Speak then, and speak quickly. How came you by this letter?"

The hand dropped from the shoulder, but fell to the butt of a navy six, in a voiceless threat.

"It are not a very long story," responded Lewis, who managed to surround his whisky without losing time in the operation.

"Ther boss hev bin prancin' round ther country an' leavin' ther Short Ridge ter run itself till it's 'bout time fur him ter take a squint an' see fur hisself what kinder a mess of stewed huckleberries he's stirrin' his spoon in. We want some wages out thar, we do; an' ther's various other leetle p'int's thet he orter 'spress his 'pinion 'bout; so Rube gi'n me a letter fur him, an' started me out fur Cactus Fork ter bring him back."

"Waal, he ain't thar—started fur Black Dam early this mornin'."

"An' what's happened ter him?" chorused half a dozen voices, though Bart Brandt remained silent, with set teeth and glittering eyes. "Why ain't he hyar?"

"Ez I war intendin' ter say, he war held up all-so—leastwise, so I jedge, an' I'd be a durned fool ef I didn't."

"What's that? Hev they hurt him? Spit it out, can't ye? Don't be so durned slow."

"Slow yerself. Hyer's bed rock. I war jingling along when I heard the usual shout, an' not bein' cussed with ez much coin ez brains I held up, thinkin' what durned fools they war."

"Who are you?" sez ther captain ov ther gang; an' it seemed to me I could hear ther steam beginnin' ter rise in ther tube ez he war holdin' level fur my knowledge-box. 'An' what yer doin' 'long hyer this time er night?"

"I'm Lem Lewis, ov ther Short Ridge, an' I'm ridin' fur Cactus Fork ter fetch Judge Brandt back. He's wanted at ther mine."

"At that ther agent gi'n a snort."

"You're our meat, then—jest ther feller we're lookin' fur. You needn't go a step furdur. Ther jedgo are a-visitin' us, an' it ain't altogether convenyunt fur him to leave on short notice. Hyer's a letter frum him to his brother, Bart Brandt, ez he left back thar a-runnin' things; an' fur fear he won't be ez active ez he mout, jest remark ter Black Dam at large thet ef they don't pony up twenty thousand dollars fur him afore ther end ov next week, off goes ther jedgo's head."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

JUDGE BRANDT'S LETTER STARTS A CIRCUS.

THE announcement of Lem Lewis did not cause as much surprise as indignation. He had discounted its effects pretty well by his prelude. When he had so far finished his narrative Brandt turned away from him with the letter in his hand, at the same time beckoning to Ready Rube, who followed him to the bar.

"Read that," he said, laying down the papers. "I suppose you know the old man's handwriting well enough to see that this is no gum game, but a square set up. There is what he says; and he puts in a power of attorney to make sure of there being no trouble. He ain't scared; but he seems to know he's in a thundering tough place, and that it would be as well to make things ready for getting him out. The question is, can it be done?"

"Hyer, Jimmy, help us to go over these papers. I reckon they've got to be read out anyhow, an' ther' orter be some one ter swear to 'em."

Ready Rube beckoned to Burke as he spoke, and together the three men leaned over them, Rube's finger marking the place as they read.

"AMONG THE OUTLAWS.

"BROTHER BARTON:—

"The call to Cactus Fork was worse than a hoax, and the messenger was a fraud. At least that is what I understand from the sequence of things. I rode right into the arms of the road-agents. I did not expect anything beyond a temporary delay, as I had offered no resistance, and had a fairish amount of money. Unfortunately that was not what they were after. When I had been rendered incapable of resistance, I was informed that I would be compelled to remain a prisoner until such time as a ransom was paid commensurate with my importance."

"I have been treated well enough, but that is, no doubt, from interested motives; and I have been given plainly to understand that if negotiations fall through so will I—to China, or in that direction."

"I am given three weeks to raise fifteen thousand dollars in. Before the expiration of that time you will be notified where and how it is to be paid. It will not be at Black Dam."

"In addition they have captured a young man named Thaddeus Rousveldt, who, they say, is a friend of the Rands. While you are about it raise five thousand to loan Mr. Rand if he requests it, to ransom the young man."

"This money must be raised—although I hope something may yet happen that I can get off scot free without its payment. I do not intend to run any great risks, however. When you come to look over my affairs you will see that I can't afford it. I've got too much ore in sight to risk it all for a paltry fifteen thousand. To make sure that you have no trouble I send the power of attorney, and a schedule. You will see that I have enough on deposit, and you can have it there on two weeks' notice. Meantime boom things at the Short Ridge. I have no doubt you and Rube can pull together, and I expect on my return to be pleasantly surprised at the progress made."

"Your brother, BAILEY BRANDT."

Inclosed was the power of attorney mentioned, bearing in one corner the signatures of John Smith and William Brown as witnesses.

Doubtless the outlaws were very much in earnest about having everything shipshape and in order. As long as the witnesses could not be got at their signatures could hardly be questioned.

"That's what he says," said Bart, looking up when the reading was finished. "But Bailey is one of your quiet men that think a heap, and I can guess what he means. He'll pay that fifteen thousand if he must, but he'll spend another fifteen thousand hunting them down when he gets loose. He's a bad man to have on the trail, is Bailey Brandt—worse than I am, and that's saying a good deal. And, by Heaven, this gang will have us both! I came down here to strike the old boy for just that solid sum. He can't see us both, and he'll have to look out for himself."

Who runs this gang? What is known about it?"

"Can't prove it by me. They've bin doin' some scatterin' work fur a month, but seem ter hev bin layin' back only fur a real good snap. An' they've struck it rich."

"Whist, me b'ye; is it ther agints ye' axin' about? Sure, an' ef there ain't wan av thim in Black Dam, watchin' out, Oi'm a howlin' liar!"

Paddy the Wheeler had been a quiet but interested listener. Now he threw in his opinion with an air of confidence, that made a decided impression. Bart Brandt turned sharply on him.

"Who are you?"

"Oh, Oi'm Paddy the Wheeler, frum iverywhere, last frum Modoc. It's a shport an' miner I be."

"Ah! I've heard of you. And now, what reason can you give for such an opinion?"

"R'azon, d'yez ax? Sure, I smell him! Oi've that keen a bugle Oi kin scent wan av ther spalpeens a moile. Oi'd sooner talk to yez, fur ther rist, all by yerself alone. But, Mister Brandt, darlint, ain't it ther quarest thing in ther world that where One-Arm Dave are, there yez foind jist sich snaps ez these? Oi've see'd it afoore more ner wanst, an' ther b'yes did say—"

Paddy the Wheeler's voice had gradually dropped to a whisper, which none but Brandt could hear at all plainly; though, as the name of One-Arm Dave was mentioned with a little more emphasis than the rest, the surrounding ears caught that much, without gaining much understanding of the context.

"The same might be said of you," answered Brandt, coldly. "If you have no further proof, you had better be careful how you blow off your lip. He shoots pretty straight."

"An' so does Paddy the Wheeler. Cut an' come ag'in! Ef Oi ain't there ther fourst ily, Oi circle ther pit an' troy 'em ag'in. Oi'm a rooster wid ther gafts, an' did game to ther rattles!"

"But you'd sooner shoot a man in the back than run any risks. All the same, what you say is worth looking into. I haven't any too high an opinion of the man myself. And it chimes in with what I said a bit ago."

"An' ef I hed my chip, I'd swear ter ther same string. Ef ther's ary man 'bout Black Dam ez needs watchin', it's him."

The last words were confidential among the four men that were grouped together, but it would have taken more care than they exhibited to prevent its drift being caught by others near. They were really very much like the stage whisper of an "aside"—loud enough to be heard all over the theater.

Probably the audacious game that was being played with the popular Judge Brandt warped the judgment of the crowd, and in spite of the very cold way in which Bart Brandt received the suggestion, it took. From that time on, there was a strong party in Black Dam who would view Dave Granger as an object of suspicion.

There was one man who did not, however, though his opinion did not then go for much with the most of the people.

That man was Hank Green.

He had been loafing around so long, and lived after such a garrulously impecunious fashion, that for the most part he was considered a worthless old bummer; and there were just three men in the room who knew otherwise, and suspected that he was setting a game which, if it worked, would be a surprise to the town.

It was their business to see that it didn't work, and they would have plenty of backing, though, on the face of things, it looked as though the absence of the judge was peculiarly unfortunate.

Hank Green, on the other hand, had been waiting a good while for his chance, and to find a man of nerve to back him at the right time. He expected to have to fight the Short Ridge men, tooth and nail, but in a fair and square way. This looked like something else, and in the excitement of the moment he lost his head.

To the surprise of every one, he suddenly came shambling forward, shaking his clinched fist.

"Yer talkin' 'bout Dave Granger, be ye?"

Why, dog-gone yer one-hoss tail-feathers, ye ain't fit among yer, ter clean his boots. Who be you ez is castin' slurs at ez squar' a man ez ever walked this hyar footstool? He kin jest mop ther floor up with ary red-headed Irishman ez ever drew breath, an' ef he ain't hyar ter talk fur hisself hyar's old Hank Green that kin talk fur him. You hear me, say?"

"Whist, yer owld fool. Cut that short afoor yer begin. You ain't ther kinder mon ez ort ter talk ter me. Paddy the Wheeler don't want ter put ther sculp av a loostick on his record. Home wid ye afoor yer mommy knows ye'r out."

"You kin take all ther sculps you kin git, an' Hank Green won't raise a whimper ef yersnatches hissen along with ther rest. He's ther blackberry ez raises his voice fur a pard that ain't round. You jest chaw them words you was a-sayin' now, er I'll climb yer. I'm slow ter start; but mighty bad when I git a-goin'."

The result was a little different from the expectation, though the Irishman flushed angrily, and his hand dove rapidly to his hip. Hank Green as a chief was something so new to Black Dam that in spite of the serious nature of the subject at hand there was a roar of laughter in which all joined save Paddy the Wheeler, and Bart Brandt.

The Irishman was not supposed to know anything about the estimation in which Black Dam held Hank Green, and Bart Brandt had his own reasons for accepting almost any cause of quarrel with the seemingly worthless old fraud.

A moment later Ready Rube grasped the situation. The old man had three bitter enemies there—though only one of them might care to show his hand—and no friends.

Paddy was a ruffian of experience. Whether old Hank was a fighter or not, he was too much in earnest to allow of much fooling with, or throwing away of chances, and the Irishman regulated himself accordingly.

"Take that back, yerself," he growled. "Oi'm a shtranger ter Black Dam, an' not shpoilin' fur a foight, but ef a mon crowds me Oi' take him fer phat he calls hisself, an' drops him on soight. Howld yer hands up now an' say it all back'ards, l'avin' off where yer begun, sayin' amen, er git riddy fur prayers."

A look of dogged obstinacy settled in the old man's face as he saw a revolver leap up from the belt of the Irishman, and lie in level with his heart. He had not only shown his hand a great deal more than he wanted to, but had got himself into no end of danger besides; but he never weakened.

"I take nothin' back. Ef you er any other man says Dave Granger ain't a square solid, honest man ter tie to I say you er he's a liar an' a hoss-thief, an'—"

"That's enough," interposed Paddy sternly. "Don't yez say anither worrud. Oi don't take that frum no mon. Oi hev ther drap on yez, an' Oi'm ter kape it, bu Oi'll give yez wan chance fur yer white alley. Throw down yer belt, an' oi'll mate yez wid ther bare hands—an' bate ther loife out av yez. Oi'll give yez while Oi count foive, an' be quick about it. Me finger's a-cetchin' now. Wan, two, three—"

"Excuse me, my friend; but as this old gentleman don't seem exactly in condition to take care of his interests it looks as though it would be only a neighborly turn if I should see him over the raffle. How long has this thing been going on, and what is it all about? No. Don't try it unless you want a spell of sickness, a very serious spell. When I talk to a man with a weapon in his hand I generally have my own in reach and if you turn your head you will observe, from the position of my coat pocket that I have you lined."

At the sound of the voice Paddy the Wheeler gave a perceptible start, but he never moved his eye from the face of Green.

"This ain't your cirkiss, Dave Granger, an' you'd better kape out. Oi'm not givin' ther drap away whin Oi hould it, an' ef yer shute me frum behindt ther men ov this camp 'll shwing yer up so quick it'll make yer head shwim. D'yez moind that, now?"

"Then over goes your apple-cart!" exclaimed Granger, and as he spoke he sprang, his hand jerking out of the pocket where it had been hiding, and showing the derringer it had held.

He had come gliding into the room so quietly that he entirely escaped notice, and the first intimation of his presence was his address to Paddy the Wheeler.

The brief conversation prevented Bart Brandt from altogether losing his chance. He gave a quick glance at Ready Rube, that was full of meaning; and when Granger sprung Rube was ready to act. As the butt of the derringer dropped on the head of Paddy the Wheeler, grinding him to the floor, the hand of the Short Ridge boss flew up.

At the sharp report that followed a man staggered away; but it was not Dave Granger.

With a snarling curse Ready Rube's hand gave a flint in the air, and the picture dropped with a clang to the floor, while as he shook his shattered fingers, the blood from them spattered the faces of the nearest of the bystanders.

CHAPTER XXIX.

COOL CAL STRIKES THE TRAIL.

POCKET PETE had been very shrewd in his efforts at working up the case in regard to the disappearance of Helen Harcourt, yet he had skirmished over beyond the line of exact truth, by inference at least in his statements to Solon Rand and his daughter.

True, he had guessed at the facts as he stated them, impelled by what seemed to him testimony worthy of consideration; but he made no mention of the actual evidence that put the matter almost beyond a doubt.

He was standing in the sunlight of the early morning, scratching his head and looking, first at the ground near the hotel, and then at a possible course that led away into the mountains. He saw some traces, but it was a question in his mind whether any one else could see the same, without first knowing what to look for.

While thus engaged he heard a voice that sounded somewhat familiar and looking up he saw his fellow-passenger on the outside, old Dan White.

"I wouldn't do it ef I war you, pard, I wouldn't do it," was his salutation. "Thar ain't half fun an' no pleasure at all in stickin' yer nose where it may be shied off. You didn't see nothin' ov what war goin' on hyarabouts, las' night, neither did I—mebbe."

The old fellow couldn't look more disreputable than he had done; but he had the appearance of a man who had been on a tearing spree the night before, and whose coppers were very hot, this morning. Pete measured him up in a minute.

"Put it thar, hearty, put it thar!" he exclaimed, holding out his hand. "I've bin a-lookin' fur yer, ever since we pulled in hyar. It's my treat, don't yer know, so jist kim along an' see what sort er sample lots Jimmy Burke's gin-juggler 'll sling out."

"Now yer hit me whar I live, I'm right in town, all dressed up fur ther 'casion, an' ez we go 'iong mebbe we kin wrastle over ther strange perceedin's ov las' night."

Dan White might have been drunk the night before, but it was drunkenness of a kind that left his wits about him enough to note and remember a strange thing that had happened.

When he had felt that the benzine imbibed had taken a square hold and was getting the better of him, and at the same time noted that the slender stock of coin with which he struck the berry had completely evaporated, he drew off for repairs, and to save trouble of the kind he was only too well accustomed to.

He staggered off until somewhere near the Colonnade, and then, feeling the impossibility of getting fairly out of the town, meandered around to reach the rear of that building, finally dropping just in its shadow.

The rest was a good deal like a dream, and it was only the meeting with Pocket Pete that recalled it. After a blank during which he had probably been in a drunken stupor, he had heard a noise like the stamping of a horse, and looking up saw that the animal was standing there, perfectly unattended, its bridle-reins flung over its head. While he looked two men came out of the hotel, carrying between them a motionless form. One of them mounted the horse, received from the other the figure, which now seemed to be that of a young girl, and without a word,

gathering up the reins, rode rapidly away toward the mountains, following the very line indicated by Pete's glances. After that came another blank.

When White's eyes first fell upon Pocket Pete in a confused way he identified him with the man he had seen standing there the night before; but a few words convinced him that he had been mistaken, and he had not a doubt but that he had witnessed the abduction of Helen Harcourt—Cal Barret's daughter.

Dan White received his morning bitters in several detachments, while Pete went off to tell Barret of what he had discovered. Then he called on the Rands, and after that he and Cool Cal went quietly out of town; and they went in just the opposite direction to that pointed out by White.

"Ef ther ole man keeps his mouth shut ez tight ez he promised ther' won't be anybody swooping along after us; and ef we strike ther trail two'll be better ner a dozen et least ter find whar they went ter!"

"Yes, and one would be better than two if I was fairly certain of myself. If I gather up the strength that I ought to have I may yet want to go it alone. Meantime, I'm thankful for your kindness, pard, and won't forget it."

"That's all right, an' ther less we talk about it ther less chance ther'll be fer some sneakin' outsider ter git in, on ther ground-floor. Hyar's about ther jumpin'-off place, an' yander a good course—south, southwest an' a leetle south ov south."

The two turned aside from the trail they had been following, and were fairly embarked on their seemingly hopeless quest.

Hours passed, and far from failing Cal Barret seemed to grow stronger as the day advanced. He showed a knowledge of the mountain track that surprised his comrade, who would have stumbled on blindly, and perhaps found no outlet to the mazes among which they soon became involved.

Yet Barret never hesitated, and finally they debouched into a trail which led from Cactus Fork to the Dam. By the roundabout way in which they had come it was many more miles to the town than by the straight road, but they had more or less thoroughly explored the ground over which they had passed, and still the indications beckoned them on.

When they had left that trail some distance behind them Cool Cal suddenly threw up his hand and halted.

As promptly Pocket Pete stood still and listened.

To his surprise he could hear the far-off murmur of voices.

He looked around him, downward, and then up, following the direction in which Barret's finger pointed.

Then he was certain.

The two were following a blind sort of path they had struck, by which Barret expected to reach the crest of the elevation beyond. Just here it carried them upward along the face of a precipitous wall. Above hung the towering rocks, while at their side yawned the gulch.

From the voices it seemed certain that this was not the only path, but that there was above them, another and perhaps a better one, on which some one was traveling.

As they listened the words came still more clearly, until at last they dropped down to them with thorough distinctness.

Cool Cal looked at his partner in the venture, and smiled; then, crouching close to the wall, both listened eagerly. From almost the first intelligible word, they knew that they had made a find.

"Go ahead, now, and keep your eyes open. If it is necessary, you, King Cole, will have to make a story to fit, and go to Black Dam openly; but if you can strike some one on the trail that you can force or coax to take it in, so much the better. Of course not a word of the little accident. The letter don't provide for that, and it probably happened after you left. If you get an outsider to take that off of your hands, then you want to slide into the Dam quietly, see that he does his work, and attend to the rest of the business. About that part, no lies, but the plain, simple truth, as it is laid down in the gospels. The three of you ought to be enough for the job, and if you do it right I promise double pay and a two weeks' fur-

lough as soon as you can be spared. Remember, there's more in this than in holding of hearses for the next six months. Do the job up brown and if anything happens I'll be on hand to see you out of the mess. Now, paddle on."

The three men indicated probably obeyed without answer, since no other voice was heard, but simply the sounds of their departing footsteps. Then, after a brief interval, other footsteps were faintly heard, returning up the mountain-side.

"On the trail at last," hissed Cal Barret, and from the tigerish glitter in his eyes Pocket Pete could see that whether the man deserved his *sobriquet* of "Cool Cal" or not, there were times when the blood would course through his veins like molten lava.

"I dreamed of this," he continued, "but it has been hard and weary to wait. I think he is nearing the end of his tether at last—if you do not fail me."

"I'm with yer, pard, tell ther tootin' ov ther horn. Ef ther's ary thing crooked, Pocket Pete's ther man ter see it made straight. Name yer game, spread yer lay-out, an' see me chip."

"Yet why should you? Few men have I trusted, yet they were the ones I found to be the worst of all. If I am deceived in you it will be no surprise, since I can see no interest to hold you straight."

"Not countin' ther leetle dumb gal ez enything at all, nor Pocket Pete's word an' hand ez wu'th shucks! Hev it yer own way, pard; but all ther same see whar I'll be at ther finish."

"Let it go at that, let it go. I did not mean to offend you. You ought to be able to see the next move. You must go back to Black Dam and learn what is in the message that is being sent; what part of it is false, and why; and who is the person to whom King Cole makes his confidential communication. I will follow the trail of the man above. I will stake all I am worth, which is little enough since the racket of last night, that I find Helen on the way. If they have harmed her let them beware."

"My name, too; but don't yer think we hed better work this thing tergether, fu't this end an' then t'other?"

"No. Each clew is too important to give up, and were I compelled to choose one of them I would say Black Dam first."

"Then ye'r' trustin' me, after all. Say it all over an' say it slow. When I git ther hang ov what yer hev ter shout I'll be ready fur ter try ther shute. I kin work my way back ter ther Fork trail, an' after that it'll be plain sailin'. Ov course I don't count on comin' inter camp with banners a-flyin', cannon a-boomin' an' everybody sayin', 'Hyar's yer returned prodigal.'"

Very briefly did Cool Cal repeat what he had for the other to do. When that little was mastered Pocket Pete resolutely turned his face toward Black Dam, and left Cool Cal to pursue alone his dangerous researches.

Pete kept fairly to the rear of King Cole and his allies, saw the affair that turned Lem Lewis the messenger from the Short Ridge back, and would doubtless have been close at his heels when he entered Black Dam, had it not been that he had to keep an eye on King Cole while himself remaining out of sight.

Cole was in no great hurry to move, but when he started straight in his wake followed Pocket Pete, until the trail led him into Black Dam.

King had made changes in his dress, and scarcely looked like the man who had lately rustled around the Dam, yet he did not seem to care to trust himself in Johnny Burke's saloon, though he watched it from without.

While lingering near, Pocket Pete pushed past him and entered the Emporium. A moment later came the report of a pistol, and a cry, as detailed in the previous chapter.

CHAPTER XXX.

PADDY THE WHEELER GETS HOLD.

"Not jest now."

At the unexpected calamity that had overtaken Ready Rube, Bart Brandt glared around him in search of the possible cause, and seeing a look of surprise in every face his eyes again sought Dave Granger. He gave a step toward him, and the scowl on his face boded no good to the man with the "left" hand, though he hesitated to show

up in what he had hoped might be worse than a brawl.

And then it was that Pocket Pete slid in between them, with his warning that was also a challenge. The man always seemed to come with the drop; and until he had seen how badly Ready Rube had been hurt, and what was the temper of the town, Brandt scarcely cared to push matters to extremities. He faced Pete with a harsh laugh, at the same time spreading out his empty fingers with a significant gesture.

"You'll rub around here once too often," he said, in a low tone, "and the coroner—if they can afford such a luxury in Black Dam—will have a case. And if Black Dam takes in Double-Shot Dave for being a road-agent, you'll be apt to swing from the same tree."

"Tree be hanged! yer can't find one within half a mile ov Black Dam; an' ef ther' be, Dave Granger ain't the man ter swing from it—not unless Bart Brandt hangs from ther same branch. You give him a square set-up, an' he'll show yer a clean bill ov ladin'. I don't jest ketch on ter ther game ye'r tryin' ter set up; but ther's some shenanigan, an' I'm down on that ef I hev ter shoot a man. Put that in yer pocket and salt it down."

"I have some other things salted down already, but it will all keep, I hope, until I am ready to open the barrel. There will be no more trouble here to-night if I can help it, and if you are wise you will not force it on. It wouldn't take much influence to turn the town on and run you through."

"Ef ther's ary pertick'ler rush 'bout fillin' ther graveyard let 'em cut loose. Ef, not, I kin wait. Sooner er later I'll hev ter drop yer, I s'pose; but I'm willin' ter let yer hev a leetle longer fling. You look after yer bull-dog, an' mebbe I'll find he hev more friends than you think he kin tie to. He's a mighty oncertain man, is Dave Granger, ef he does seem ter hoe his own row an' go fur Dave."

Pocket Pete held his man in conversation just long enough to allow things to get into shape. When the Short Ridge boss had had time to somewhat recover his wits after his late surprise, he managed to send Bart Brandt to his side, while he turned his eye on Paddy the Wheeler, whose senses, scattered by the solid blow which had stretched him on the floor, were coming back. He had raised himself to a sitting posture, and was staring around in a foolish sort of way, as if uncertain what had happened.

Dave Granger was no longer there. Under cover of Pocket Pete's diversion, he had taken Hank Green by the collar and fairly dragged him out. The old man had become so excited that nothing less than actual force could cause him to go.

"Look here, old man, you've went and gone and done it. If you can't keep that tongue of yours still, we'll just have to fight twice as hard. But what in thunder did you want to give us away to that crowd for?"

The fresh air cooled Green down a little, and he answered shortly, but in reason:

"What have I done? Not a word did I say till they began to sling around that Dave Granger hed a finger in ther road-agent biz, an' then I jist tole 'em they lied! O'u'd mortal man do more, er less, fur a pard?"

"Who knew that I was your pard? You must have been shooting off your mouth, or they never would have tried to put up such a game on you. Man alive, they were after your scalp to-night, and they'll take mine along with it when they get the chance. The game is open now, and our side will have to show its hands."

"But I tell yer they didn't git a p'int from me, nohow."

"Then they got it somewhere else. Bart Brandt is no man's fool, and if he is having his men kick up rows at the Emporium, it means something. I'll know more about this before the evening is over; meantime, you go home, stay there, and keep your mouth shut. I'm satisfied we can make a big strike if we can get justice; but that's a commodity that don't flourish very strongly at Black Dam, and I don't agree to fight an army."

"I'm in your hands. Good-night. Ef they hang yer fur a road-agint, it won't be the fault ov old Hank Green. Member that."

The old man paddled off without another word. He wanted to show his implicit obedience, but at the same time he was a good deal hurt at the aspersions on his prudence. The fact that he had been cautioned to stay away from Burke's made him feel the thing the more.

"They jest wanted me ter show myself 'round town," he muttered, "but ter stay away from Jimmy's, the only place whar thar's any fun goin'. Ef they'd put me out at ther claim, an' let Seth Rogers run Black Dam, it wouldn't 'a' bin half so hard. He ain't got nothin' ter do 'ceptin' ter snooze 'round. An' hyar I've got ter keep my mouth shet, eyes open, an' not move a finger when I see thunder an' all a-brewin'. I sw'ar I'd a'most sooner lose ther bonanza than not hev ther rights ov a free-born, native American citerzen. Well, ef they go fur him heavy he kin hoe his own row. Hank Green don't chip in again, noway. The durned fool hez gone back thar, where ther's goin' ter be war, an' him alone. Ef they take him in whar'll I be? Dog-goned ef I hain't half an idea ter go an' yank him out, an' see how he'd like it. Ther more I think ov it ther wuss it seems ter me I've bin sot on."

So the old man soliloquized; and halting he turned and stared back toward the Emporium.

For a moment or so he watched the lights flashing from the windows, and listened to the roar of voices that surged out upon the night air. His foot was even raised irresolutely, and yet for the purpose of a backward step.

There was something going on there that he wanted to see powerfully bad. It seemed to him that the crowd had been augmented by a large arrival, and that the new-comers were making things remarkably lively.

He resisted the temptation, however, and once more strode sullenly away.

His shanty was quite at the other end of town, and to reach it he had to go past the Colonnade.

In comparison with the legitimate saloons the hotel had a darkly somber look, and as the old man passed he halted a moment, cogitating whether he would be apt to find any congenial spirits hanging around there at this time of night.

It seemed doubtful, and he was just turning away when something horribly unexpected occurred.

There was a crash and a roar, a great flare of light, and the Colonnade seemed to be disappearing bodily, while a crash of falling timbers, and the voices of human beings in agony, rung out upon the night air.

At that he did not hesitate an instant, but ran toward the spot with all the speed he could muster.

An explosion of some kind had occurred, though how there could be a chance for such a terrific one is more than he could guess. As he went he yelled; and the cry was taken up further down the street, growing in volume until it burst into Jimmy Burke's just at an interesting time.

For the news of Judge Brandt's misfortune had not only been carried all over the town; but in some not very clearly-defined way had reached the Short Ridge, causing the gang there to start in, helter-skelter, to learn the facts in a more reliable fashion.

And just as they rushed into Burke's, Paddy the Wheeler, without a syllable of warning flung himself upon Granger, who was re-entering by the rear door.

"Ah, Oi've got yez now," he yelled, as his fingers closed on Dave Granger's throat. "Yez kin hit a mon whin he ain't lookin', an' mebbe take in an owld, sour-headed cripple loike ther jidge, but Oi'll show yez what yez hev ter handle when Paddy McCluskey gits his fingers on yer thrapple."

CHAPTER XXXI.

BART BRANDT SPREADS HIMSELF AND THE COLONNADE WINDS UP IN A BLAZE.

IN the trouble that was brewing Bart Brandt had kept a reasonably cool head. He had allowed Pocket Pete to have his own way, and taken water after the most approved fashion; but all the time he was keeping an eye open for a chance. When the Wheeler threw himself upon Dave Granger he thought it had come, for at the same moment he heard the sound of the skurrying

feet without, and he knew that the new-comers would be apt to take things as they found them. As the door flew open he jerked out his revolver and lined Pocket Pete while that worthy had his attention momentarily directed by the sudden and unexpected movement of McCluskey. The best of men cannot look in every direction at once.

"Hands up there, and fingers empty," he shouted. "If you stir an inch I'll blow you cold. This thing has got to be looked into one time or another, and there will be no better time than now. Take their tools away, boys, and we'll hear them give an account of themselves. If they're anything to do with this road-agent racket I reckon justice ain't dead in Black Dam!"

Pocket Pete remained quiet. He had an idea—not altogether a wild one—that Bart Brandt would be perfectly satisfied to run some risks for a shot at him; and he did not intend to give him a chance, believing that he would not fire until there was at least the shadow of an excuse. If he had known who the men were who were tumbling through the doorways he might have been less passive. With Dave Granger it was different.

Paddy the Wheeler was a powerful ruffian who was certain that if he could once get a gripe on a man with but one hand he could handle him. It was Dave Granger's shooting only, that made him bashful.

Yet he never was more mistaken in his life.

Quick as had been his motions they were met with movements as rapid. The fist of Granger shot out from the shoulder with a force that almost broke his gripe, and then the two forms swayed backward and forward until, just as Brandt had drawn a bead on Pocket Pete, and half a dozen men were ready to dive in to assist, Paddy the Wheeler felt a set of fingers close on his own throat with a force that seemed about to tear the flesh out. This way and that he was shaken, and then Granger's hip slid under his own, his heels went up into the air, and once more he was hurled senseless to the floor.

"That's enough of that!" Granger exclaimed, and his fingers held a revolver that looked in Bart Brandt's direction. "If you want to do any shooting on my account I'm here, trimmed and heeled, all ready to weigh in. No b'ilin' is needed to make me fight; but you can have all you want from the word go. You understand? If your pill-box snaps, down goes your meat-wagon."

"That's right, pard. He got the drop on me while I was watchin' your leetle circus, but he's a reasonable man—as reasonable as you ever met. Just tell him what you want done and you'll find him there, every time."

"This is no gum game, Mr. Granger, but a movement of the law, which, if you are wise, you will fall in with without making any trouble. If your skirts are clean you can show it; but if you begin with pistol-practice weight will tell, and by the time the frolic is over you won't care a continental whether you have a show or not."

"Allow me to differ—at least till I know what it's all about. As near as I can make out, some one jumped old man Green, who can't fight for a cent. I took his part as easy as I could, and as nobody is killed I can't see how you can make that a hanging matter."

"If that old fool hadn't put himself into the way no one would have thought of bothering him. I'll give it to you straight and short. The agents have got Bailey Brandt corraled up in the mountains—ask fifteen thousand dollars to let him shake his foot free in Black Dam, again—and some one hinted that—I wouldn't shoot, the boys have you covered—you had a finger in the pie."

"Which man?"

Granger glared around him in a wicked way. If his eyes could have caught sight of any one half-way admitting the charge he looked as though he was ready to shoot, covered or not.

"The man that gave the strongest hint can't speak for himself just now. When he comes round we'll give you a chance to talk against each other. There's been enough fooling now. Do you and your pard here cave, or are we to take you?"

"I don't know why you set him up as a pard of mine. Until we struck Bunco just before we came here, I never saw him in my life. He can do what he wants. I'm only

talking for myself. If any man tries to lay hands on me there will be blood on the moon. I'll listen to what you men have to say; but to put myself in the hands of the Short Ridge gang—oh, no, not for David."

"You hear that, men? I don't ask any one to run in the way of bullets, because this is my lay-out; but at the inquest I want you to remember he had fair warning, and refused to listen."

Then for the first time Bart Brandt let the Dam see what manner of man he really was. He was talking at Dave Granger, but, with the bound of a tiger he sprung at Pocket Pete, tore him from the floor, and flung him, as though he was an infant, full at the one-armed man. As the two crashed upon the floor together, without a shot being fired, Brandt hurled himself upon them, seizing each man by the throat, while he pinned them down with a knee on either breast.

"Now, hop in here, and tie them up. I never hurry my work, but I calculate to do it sure. They ain't so hard to handle if you know how."

With a yell of mingled admiration and delight the men from the Short Ridge rushed forward, cheered on by the plaudits of the majority of the citizens present. The brother of Judge Brandt had some claim on their sympathy, and then they could not help but admire the masterly manner in which he had got away with the baggage of two men at the same time.

And just then some of the men on the outskirts of the jam, heard a distant, muffled roar, and hardly a minute later, as it seemed, the door swung open and a yelling man stuck his head into the Emporium.

"Ho, ther! Ther Colonnade hez bin blowed up, an' all aboard buried. Them ez is men pile out hyar an' help dig ther wounded outen the ruins."

The sound of the hollow report was explained to those who had heard it yet the crowd hesitated a moment. Black Dam was panning out too much fun. There were two men, waiting to be hung; and now something had happened at the Colonnade, the principal hotel in town. The man in the doorway shouted again:

"Thar's women under the ruins, an' ther ole man frum ther East got throw'd outen ther winder an' are howlin' about his darter. He'll give heaps ov rocks ter ther man that brings her out."

The chivalry of the crowd would not, have been appealed to in vain, even if Bart Barret had not set the example.

At the first words he looked up in a wild, startled sort of way; at the second address he forgot his prisoners, and bounded for the door.

At once a miscellaneous lot struck off in his wake, and the whole gang went streaming along the street, heading toward the space where the Colonnade had stood, but which now was marked by a rapidly growing light.

To add to the catastrophe the place, or what was left of it, was on fire.

Bart Brandt was one of the earliest arrivals from the Emporium, but he found quite a crowd collected at the ruins, and nearly every one seemed too dazed or too excited to do more than stare, or wander around. Hank Green was the coolest person there, and by chance he was the first man that Brandt struck. He was standing a little out of the crush, with his hands in his pockets, and he gave a chunk of information without hesitation.

"Yes. I seen it. I war comin' 'long, 'thout thinkin' much 'bout anything, when I hearn ther whang ov a blast an' looked up spry. Ef I know anything 'bout sich things—an' I orter, fur I've bin handlin' powder, man an' boy, nigh on ter forty year, ther war a blast let off at one eend ov ther Colonnade ez blowed that up sky high; an' ther rest ov ther b'ildin' jest begun fallin' toward ther hole ez war made. Ther house war too big fer ther lumber in it, I reckon, an' some ov ther beams war stretched a leetle. I run fur ther place ez tight ez I could, an' begun a-haulin' on ther beams till I see'd ther fire a beginnin' ter flicker an' spread. Then I hove'd back. I ain't ready fur Green on toast—not this time, nohow—but ef anybody kin show me whar I kin do a-workin' I'll be ther ef I bu'st my back."

While he listened Brandt looked cagerly

around. In the unhappy mass before him it was hard to recognize the rambling, roomy building, once the largest in Black Dam, and it was harder to decide where to take hold, to do any good. From the ruins there came no sound; but leaving the old man, even before he had finished his story, Brandt began to circle around.

He came upon Solon Rand, wringing his hands and looking hopelessly at the heap of timber. He caught him by the shoulder.

"Do I understand that your daughter is missing?"

"Yes, yes, she is in there somewhere. Save her, save her! Money is no object. I will make the man rich who can find her for me, alive. Are there no men here that will help? Don't you see the fire spreading?"

"You keep cool and I can put a hundred men at work; and they won't do it for money, either," Brandt said, coldly. "We can't turn over the whole of the Colonnade. Point out to us exactly where to look for her."

Mr. Rand continued to wring his hands.

"How can I tell? I'm lost, I'm lost!"

"You are an elegant man for the situation. Where were you when the explosion came, and where was your daughter?"

"I was at the window; and she was in her own room, asleep. I had been in bed but I couldn't sleep and dressed myself. Then I heard a noise outside and went to the window to look. Just as I caught sight of two men riding away I was blown out, and the house fell behind me."

Jerry Tucker came limping forward, and Brandt seized upon him.

"Here, you now. Whereabouts in this pile was Miss Rand's room. Say it quiet. She may not be dead."

"It war on the other side of ther house altergether. Come along an' I'll show yer. What's ther thunderin' ole fool doin' 'round hyar, anyway? I don't b'lieve she's under thar; but it's hard ter tell."

They moved off at once, and as they went Jerry was explaining how it was that he couldn't explain.

"Deed I can't count fer it, unless it was sent ter bu'st me all up. Mebbe ther 'sploshun started ther fire, but I'm thinkin' ther fire's what started ther 'sploshun. Some durned fool galoot hed dynemite, er giant powder in his luggage, an' dropped er match. Ther fire started, an' up went ther Colonnade. That's my luck, all over."

"You're cursed cool about it. Who had you in the house that could have such luggage?"

"How in thunder kin I tell? Ther durned stuff may 'a' bin lyin' 'round fer a year, er it may hev bin stuck in ter night. I dunno nothin' 'bout that; but right thar's whar Miss Rand's winder war; an' ef she ain't made her 'scape, which I b'lieve she hez, she must be right under that pile ov rubbidge."

Bart Brandt had gone slow and steady until he had mastered all the positive information to be got. Now he gave a yell which was answered by some of the men from the Short Ridge.

"There," he shouted. "If there's any one in these ruins it is Miss Rand, and she's right there. Dead or alive we must have her out before the fire gets here—if they don't put it out. One of you men go and boss the work there, and the others stay by me here. To work!"

It looked like a hopeless task all around. Black Dam had no facilities for extinguishing a fire, and so much time had been lost that it was now under full headway. The greatest chance was that the fire was at the leeward end of the building, and the spot where Miss Rand was supposed to be entombed was at the other.

Yet Brandt did not hesitate. With his own hands he tore away the first board from the ruins, and the men from the mine seconded him. Beams flew, timbers were cast aside, great sections of siding were torn away, and, as if by magic, the resolute men burrowed into the debris.

Then, while they labored madly, the elements took a hand—and against them. There was a sudden stillness on the night air that lasted for a few moments, followed by a roar. The wind came down from the opposite quarter, bringing the flames with it, driving Bart Brandt and his score of helpers back, and wrapping the whole pile of debris in one

sheet of fire. If Belle Rand had been underneath the fallen Colonnade, her last earthly hope was gone.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SCRIMMAGE.

At the hasty summons for help the congregation at Jimmy Burke's dispersed so suddenly that there was no positive arrangement about the prisoners.

As they had no friends and were thoroughly bound, it did not seem as though there was any great necessity for having a guard over them, and it was likely that some one would assume that position anyway.

The result was that Jimmy Burke stuck to his saloon, but held a position just outside of the door. His bartender and heelers joined the rush, and, prisoners and all, there were not above half a dozen occupants of the room left behind.

Of these, Paddy the Wheeler could not have gone if he had wanted to; and the man he called Jack stuck to him, trying to hasten his revival, which progressed so slowly that at first he thought some serious injury had been done.

Jack had taken no part in the row, and acted like a man of peace all through; so much so, in fact, that he put the crowning stone on by quietly gliding to the side of the two prisoners.

"See hyar," he whispered to Pocket Pete, "I don't want ter see any more trouble. My pard he's an orful bad man when he cuts loose, an' don't stop much ter think whether it's squar' er not when he's on ther road ter git even. Will yer promise ter git out ov this ef I let yer loose, an' not start up another circus with him till he gives the word? Ef they come back hyar ez they war when they left, you'll stand a good chance ter stretch hemp—an' blame me ef I like ter see a good man go out ov ther wet after that fashion."

"Promise—you bet! That's jest our best an' only hold. We'll peromise ary thing yer like, from a hole in ther ground ter a brownstone front on Fifth avenue, New York."

Pocket Pete struck in, and he was as cordial as the good Samaritan could have wished. There was nothing "offish" about him, though he spoke in a bantering, never-say-die sort of tone, that showed he was not overwhelmed by the misfortune that had come upon him.

"An' yer pard? I'll take your word, an' his. I'd like ter see yer away frum hyar afore Paddy comes 'round."

"Mebbe he ain't comin' round anyway," suggested Pete, suspiciously.

"Oh, he's all right. I've pawed him over, an' thar's no bones broke."

"All right, then," said Dave. "We're not begging off, you understand; but if you want the claim worked from a fresh level just turn us loose and you'll find us as accommodating men as you ever struck."

"I'll trust yer—an' ef yer ever see a chance ter do me a good turn I reckon you won't furgit what I've done fur yer."

As he spoke he sliced the cards with a keen-bladed knife; and then turned away to the Wheeler, who was now rapidly recovering.

"You bet we won't; but keep that pard of yours out of the way. If he tries to rub it in too thick we'll have to go fur him fur keeps. We'll shake 'em up at ther Colonnade, a leetle, I reckon."

In this way it happened that the two came rushing up just as the turn of the wind drove the flame back upon Bart Brandt and his gang, routing them out from their work among the ruins.

There were several men on the outskirts who had not been at Benke's who gave them an idea of what had happened, and for a moment the two looked at each other.

"Yer don't seem ter sabbe," said Pete, in a low tone. "This yere's some more ov Captain Snow's leetle game. I've bin up in ther mountains, an' I've brought back wisdom in great chunks, don't yer see? They hed ther jedge, an' ther leetle dumb gal; an' now they've got erway with this yere woman ez hez ther rocks behind her, an' they think they kin clean up ther hull outfit in time, an' three motions. Dog-gone 'em, don't they know thar's sich a thing ez gittin' too much candy fur a cent? I'm round—I ain't

furgot ther game et Bunco, an' I'll git ther wuth ov thet burro er die. An' I don't reckon you'll hang back when ther chip drops? Betwixt us we kin open out ez lovely a vein ez thar's ary use fur, an' he hanged ther Black Dam aryhow."

"Confound it, man speak straight. I don't believe she's in there, but we'd have to fight the camp if we waited to see."

"All down but nine. Right yer are; an' ef so we want ter scatter up ther trail hot afore they git her in the mountains."

"I am not so sure of that though it looks as though we might want to get a little piece away from here mighty sudden. Till this thing is all cleared up they'd hang us before we could say amen."

"Yes. Ef they come fur us I'd give a hundred fur a hoss, an' even ther ole burro would't be bad ter take."

"May give the hundred and not get the hoss before we get through. There's a chance to steal a couple for present use—the judge's up yonder, and I see another there, that looks like a stranger."

"King Cole's, by mighty. He's got ther grit ov a brass-back snappin' turtle. Sail in, pard, ef yer wants ter. Pocket Pete gi'n his pledge ter stand by yer, an' he means it."

"Keep cool then, and be ready for a break. The town is all against us, but we're good for an army, and we'll only ride out of the rush. I've got a point to visit before we break for the mountains."

"Twirl yer jenny quick, then. I'm fur Cool Cal an' the dumb girl. When yer strike them ther rest ain't fur off. Now, stiddy be jerks. Hyar's Bart Brandt, an' his gun."

They had come closer to the fire as they talked in hurried whispers, and thus had thrown themselves into Brandt's range of sight.

He stared at them in astonishment. All his well done work had to be redone; though perhaps a better way was now open.

"What in the fiend's name is the meaning of this?" he exclaimed. "What's Jimmy Burke good for if he turns loose men like these. You, there! Hold up your hands!"

He spoke quickly; and his actions were just as prompt. The words are a warning, not to them, but to the men that he had made his heelers; his hand was talking as well as his tongue, and a blurred report rung out on the night air.

It would have been sharp enough if it had been a brace of ordinary men that he had caught napping; but even before his finger tightened on the trigger a ball from Dave Granger's revolver was on the way, and his hand, jerking upward, sent the bullet he had thought was going home, humming high in air. And at the same time Pocket Pete raised a little the derringer, behind his skirt, working the trigger a little too quick for the movement of King Cole, who was drawing, at Bart Brandt's shoulder.

"None killed—two badly plugged. Shell we set 'em up ag'in? Fight er skip—I'm right beside yer," yelled Pete, swinging out the revolvers from his belt.

"Skip by all means. We've got work to do that won't keep; and there's all hereafter to come back and put Black Dam on its knees."

"Hyar's fur it; but first wake 'em up enough ter hev 'em fall back. Afore we know it ther fools 'll be runnin' ther wrong way; an' weight will tell."

While he spoke he was firing as fast as finger and thumb could work his tools, his revolvers pouring out a stream of fire until, as he intended, the timid were in a panic and the wiser ones were looking a little out before closing in. Then he suddenly darted away, followed closely by Granger, their objective point being the bit of level ground where the horses mentioned were lariat.

Half a dozen bullets whistled after them as they cut the ropes and mounted the plunging animals; but before the charge that followed could reach them they were swirling down the street.

"That settles it," laughed Pete, as they dropping the yelling crowd behind them. "Ef ye don't hev a good 'count ov this hyar night's work ter give when we come back we'd better not come at all. They'll hang us fur hoss-thieves, sure."

"You got into this scrape, and I swear you will have to stay with me to the end or

there will be a dead Pete. Put *that* in your pocket and salt it down."

"Don't yer fear. I've seen wuss than this! An' I want ter have another whack at Ready Rube and that wild Irishman. Oh, I see my way clear up ter ther mines."

"You'll have plenty of chances for that whole ticket. It seems to me I can hear the Irishman squealing now. He's short of pluck in a tight pinch, but he's a mighty bad man to have behind your back."

It was all guess-work about hearing McClosky; but he was there; and talking at large. He came just too late to take part in the brief seance, but he spoke his bitter piece about what he had in for Dave Granger and the man that was training with him. Then he turned to Jack.

"To blazes wid them all! Will yez shtand by me?"

"Every time," responded his pard, proudly.

"Thin we'll take ther trail oursilves, an' we don't come back to Black Dam thill we kin bring ther bluddy schalps along wid us."

Bart Brandt was not seriously hurt—the wound in his arm hardly being as severe as the one that had crippled Ready Rube in the hand. He had quietly been having it bandaged; and now he stepped forward, evidently to speak to the Irishman.

He was a little too late. Paddy and his pard had turned, and though he called to them they did not come back.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PADDY MAKES ANOTHER WHEEL.

It was not so easy to advise. The smoking embers of the Colonnade once explored, the extent of the crime—if crime there was—would be laid bare. Till then it might be waste of time to search elsewhere; and at best little or nothing could be done before morning as those who should be at the front were in no condition to move. Bart Brandt was faintish from his wound; and Solon Rand seemed too overwhelmed to think or act.

When daylight came there was a discovery that thrilled Black Dam with horror. Some calcined bones were found that might account for Miss Rand; while, in turn, the old gentleman had totally disappeared. Whether he had wandered off in an aimless pursuit; or had been abducted by the reckless outlaws was fiercely discussed. The body-snatchers seemed to be living there and Black Dam could stand it no longer. Pursuit would be made now at any cost.

Bart Brandt, though a comparative stranger, was at the head in organizing a force. He was the judge's brother, and the Short Ridge gang was at his back. He picked his men with wonderful judgment; and as it was not desirable to depopulate the town it was a neat thing to choose from the superabundance of material offered a body of men that should be just the thing. Then he made a little speech that hit the men where they lived.

"I'll tell you frankly, boys, that if there wasn't a chance for a lady in the case I'd stop this move if I had to do it with my sixes. It may mean death to Bailey Brandt. As it is, there's not a chance to be thrown away. Old Hank Dodge at the Short Ridge knows this country by name, and there's more of you that know something of the blind trails in the mountains behind Black Dam. If we do get Bailey out safe I can promise he'll make a divvy on that fifteen thousand we're going to save him. Now, those that stand on my platform reef right in; those that don't can get in a gang by themselves, and go off some other way."

It was a fine little army that moved out, yet there seemed to be a blot on the programme, that old Hank Green was the first to notice.

"You bet it's a lovely gang, an' kin scoop in Cap. Snow—ef they hev ther chance. But, dog-gone 'em, don't they s'pose they'll be on ther lookout fur jest sich a move? Ef ther agents can't run ez fast, an' a leetle faster, you kin jump my claim. An' when they git a good ready they'll make it so hot ther fire won't burn. Fur real work, more creepin' an' crawlin', an' a heap less blowin' ov horns. Ef Cap. Snow was in this racket he hez a man watchin', an' afore now knows ther game. Look out fur breakers, I say; an'

old Hank Green knows float rock from a chunk ov salt."

"Mebbe," retorted one of his listeners, "but ef they strike ary one of them men a-watchin' it'll be mighty onhealthy—specially that one-armed cuss an' his pocket pard."

Green had learned wisdom from his experiences the night before, and did not attempt to combat public opinion, though he shook his head Galileo-like as he turned away in disgust.

Meantime the Black Dam army were not as carelessly led as Green imagined. Once on the trail Bart Brandt changed both his route and his tactics, and Dodge piloted the way into the mountains after a fashion that showed he was no stranger to the ground.

It was only when the day was well advanced that the order came to halt, at a spring that flowed from under a huge rock.

"Here is as good a place as you will find," said Brandt, after a brief conference with his guide. "You had better pack in provender enough to last you for the balance of the day, for it may be there will be no time to look out for the inner man later on. Dodge and I will scout ahead a little. He thinks we are getting warm. If we strike as I hope one of us will come back for you. And, remember, it is life or death for more than us. Not a sound after you leave this, and as little racket here as you can get along with. Post your guards, too, and look out for an attempt at a surprise. There's no telling what dodge Captain Snow may try on."

The two men glided away, and the little camp subsided into something like solemnity.

The much-needed meal was discussed, and the men were scattered around, smoking and conversing in a low tone, when the sharp challenge of the guard that had been set along the trail on which Brandt had disappeared, caused every eye to turn in that direction.

"A fri'nd wid ther countersign," came the ready answer. "Paddy ther Wheeler, come ter lade yez on ter glory. Whin I explain yez will be ready ter shout, 'Whar's Riddy Rube?'"

"Correct you are; pass in an' you'll find him waitin' fur news ov ther boss. Do yer bring it?"

"Yez kin bet on that same, an' hyar's me credensh'ls."

He came through with a careless swagger, and stopped in front of Rube.

The note that he carried was short and to the point. Written in haste with a lead pencil it just contained the words:

"Have stumbled across the bearer who will bring you right to me; come cautiously, as we have struck them where we can get the drop. Wheeler can explain the rest. BARTON BRANDT."

"And is it Bart Brandt's writin'?" asked one of the men, eying Paddy with suspicious disfavor.

"I'll gamble on that," responded Rube, drawing a similar note, though ov a different subject, from his pocket.

"I wouldn't be doubting it anyhow; but hyer's ther thing that makes it sure. It's ther only scrap ov his writin' I've seen, but it's ernuf. I'll swar ter ther same fist all ther world over."

One glance was sufficient. The Irishman's credentials were fully verified.

"Now," said Rube, "tell us yer yarn. This are from him, sure enuf; but we want ter know why he don't kim back hisself; an' how he come ter find *you* a-sashayin' round hyer. It *mout* be that you've worked roots on him. I'll swar yer can't draw not ther fu'st fine thread ov wool over our eyes."

"Wool, nothin'! Who's a-drawin'? Oi started roight out whin ther trail war hot, an' it war foine worruk it tuk, but Oi landid me game; an' whin Oi showed it ter Bart Brandt, he wint woid wid deloight. He c'u'dn't l'ave his oyes aff av thim, an' sint me ter hurry yez up."

The statements of the Wheeler were taken with some allowance. Then was held a quiet, hasty consultation. Ready Rube vouched for the genuineness of his credentials; and no one thought that Bart Brandt was the kind of a man to be very badly deceived.

Still, it was possible that there was danger enough, however honest their guide might be.

"I'll keep an eye on him, an' ef thar's a sign ov a crooked move, there'll be a dead man on the trail. My left hand is as good as

my right to pick a trigger. But I'm bettin', all ther same, thet it's a squar' deal."

With this whispered to several of the men who were of his gang at the Short Ridge, Rube gave his orders, and in a few moments the camp was deserted, the men pushing resolutely but silently on in the wake of the Irishman, who led the way without a moment's hesitation.

An hour's work, the latter part of it slower and more cautious than ever, and Paddy threw up his hand as a signal to halt, then leaned toward Ready Rube, and pointed out the course to take.

If his own belief, and that of Bart Brandt as given by him, went for anything, they were getting very warm, and it was time that caution should be redoubled.

"It's meself az knows somethin' av this same region, an' mebbe more. Av yez follid ther saming road, it's roight inter a mad hornits' nest ye'd be afther sthirrin'. Yander, though, is ther path ter glory. It's behindt an' above thim we'll be afther gittin'; an' whin we have ther drop on thim, fair an' azey, they'll have ter knuckle er git. Ef they ain't took him in, we'll foind Black Bart 'round yander rock, half-ways up."

Every eye scanned narrowly the two routes pointed out, and the statement of the Wheeler was readily understood. At least, if the last route was practicable, it was almost certain that it would flank the other and lead to a vantage ground such as the one suggested. Yet it was possible that it might lead them into some *cul-de-sac* on the mountain-side, from which they could only be extricated by a retrograde movement.

"But why ain't Brandt hyer?" answered Rube, with low fierceness. "Did he think we were going to foller yer inter sich a trap on yer own say so?"

"Och! ef ye'r' afcared, say ther worrud, an' Oi'll l'ave yez fur a sit ov dirthy owld gran'mithers! He's not waitin' on yez, whin he's got ther narve ter do ther thrick all be himself alone. Yez will foind him where Oi said, er Oi'll ate snakes."

His earnestness had its effect. With but little discussion it was agreed to proceed, though the absence of Barton Brandt began to have a discouraging effect. If he had been with them to cheer them on, it would still have required a good deal of courage to follow the dark and difficult path—or suggestion of a path—unable to pierce the gloomy recesses before, and haunted by a suspicion that their line of retreat might be effectually barred when they had once passed on.

"Whist!" exclaimed Paddy at last, in a scarcely audible voice. "It's here we ought ter foinde him, an' be ther powers Oi hear a sound. Is it Bart, er Cap. Snow? Now, Reuben, yer hez yer chance. If I ain't mistaken yez have ther innemy forninst yez. Snatch 'em bald-headed."

There did seem to be a low hum in the distance; but it hardly came from the lips of Bart Brandt. Perhaps he had gone on, and into danger. If so, Paddy the Wheeler would have gone straight first too, with his weapons drawn and his eyes open had not Rube come to the front.

"Not for Reuben! This way, you Short Ridgers! When I kin see ther land I know how she lays ez well ez ther next one an' I calkerlate my men 'll foller their boss. Thar's our way, leavin', mebbe a dozen hyer ter chip when we pile in. We kin flank 'em ef we turn yonder pint; an' ef they break they can't kerry no pris'ners through."

The division of forces was quickly made, and then Ready Rube pushed upward, passed the bend, thrust aside a veil of shrubbery—and was saluted by a pistol-shot that whistled so close that he felt the wind in his ear.

"Hyar yer have 'em—hold hard!"

The order that he had half spoken was suddenly changed to one of stern warning. The shot came from a point, almost at a level, some twenty yards away; but between Ready Rube and the marksman yawned a straight gash, a hundred feet deep. Half a dozen more steps and he halted, threw up his hand, as he spoke, and pulled trigger.

The man who had fired tossed up his arms and fell backward behind a ledge of rock that made a natural barricade. Then as the men from the Short Ridge pushed forward Rube exclaimed:

"We've got 'em boys, we've got 'em."

They're in ther barrancker, an' between two fires. They can't get up thar, an' they've got ter run, er be slaughtered."

At almost the same moment a cheer arose from the other division.

At the sound of the two shots the men appeared at the edge of the barranca; and in a twinkling saw the situation of affairs.

By taking the route they had followed, they not only escaped a well planned ambuscade, which stretched across the natural path below; but they had gained a vantage ground which would compel the outlaws to run the gantlet of their fire if they attempted to reach the rocks above by the path that now could plainly be seen, winding up from below, while their position was plainly untenable.

The appearance of the men from Black Dam was more than a surprise; and when they shot as they came the outlaws seemed to fall into a panic. Giving up all hope of defending the place, now that their numbers were known, they suddenly darted aside, into a narrow pass, hitherto unobserved, and which was their line of retreat.

For a moment they were in plain sight, and as they vanished a cry arose all along the line, punctuated by just one pistol-shot at the leader of them all, from Paddy the Wheeler, who gasped:

"Be ther holies! It's Bart Brandt hisself. He's played us fur flats, an' almost made ther rifle!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A FIFTEEN-THOUSAND-DOLLAR CHUCK.

"Be ther powers, it's acrost this we must be gittin', an' thin, ef Oi knows meself, it's at head-quarters we'll be afther foindin' ourselves."

As Paddy the Wheeler had been the only one of the crowd who had not been too flurried to sling lead, so he was the only one ready to offer a prompt suggestion.

It was possible that there was some path, hidden to view, by which the outlaws might reach the point upon the other side of the gash, and if so the opportunities for defense were entirely too good for the comfort of Ready Rube and the rest. The Wheeler's advice was so apt that it steadied every one at once.

"Yer head's level, Irish; but how's ther thing ter be did?"

Rube's question received no immediate answer, since the Wheeler turned and hurried away, running on up the natural trail, followed by a dozen or more, who were willing to try anything so they kept moving.

"There's a couple hatchets in ther outfit," suggested one of those who lingered, "an' an ax. Ef it wouldn't take too long we kin bridge it, while ther boys below kin mebbe find ther road ez ther agents took."

There was no reason why they should not go openly to work; but it would have been a long enough time before they could have gained the opposite ledge in that way.

As the ax marked the first chip, however, they heard a distant cry, and saw Paddy come running along the ledge they were striving to gain. In either hand he held a revolver, while behind him, at a scarcely less reckless gait, came the others.

He halted suddenly, vanished from view; and then reappeared for a moment, swinging his hat; while from those that joined him arose a ringing cheer.

"By ther livin' Moses," exclaimed Rube. "They've struck ther jedge."

Then they all set up a still wilder shout, and Rube went tearing away, with everybody following in his wake, to find the accessible point, which they knew could not be far away.

When they had found it, and reached the place where the Irishman had halted, they discovered the niche in the rock, and the judge, pale, nervous, and altogether the worse for hard usage.

Paddy the Wheeler held in his hands the cords just slashed from his wrists and ankles, and Bailey Brandt was beginning his story, which he told very briefly.

As far as it related to his capture the reader knows what it was, and for the rest it was not of much importance. He knew nothing, he said, of the other parties for whom the search was also made, since neither of them had been seen by him. He had mentioned the name of Mr. Rousveldt

in just the words he was requested to use; and as there was the muzzle of a pistol at the back of his ear at the time he did not hesitate, or ask foolish questions. He gave a great start when the name of Miss Rand was mentioned; but he could give no information in regard to her fate.

What he *did* know was that the chief of the road-agents had given him to understand that he was after money and intended to strike Black Dam for about all that it was worth. They were very bold ruffians, who knew thoroughly the secret hiding-places in the mountains, and being a little army in numbers laughed at the idea of attack or capture.

"An' who was ther leader?" asked Ready Rube, bluntly.

No one was likely to forget the tall, desperate man of whom they had had a glimpse, as he led the outlaws away in retreat.

"Captain Snow, is the name he was known by among his men. What else it might be of course I could not guess."

"An' yer seen him, *sure*. There wa'n't ary throw off, I reckon—wringin' in a side pard fur a stool-pigeon, while he war away workin' ther roads?"

"I do not understand you altogether, but if you mean am I sure that the man I saw was Captain Snow, I am sure of it as of any earthly thing."

"That seems kinder funny fur it war reported fur sure ez he war cavortin' 'round in another direction when he war s'posed ter be intervoo'in' you. Yer couldn't tell what sorter lookin' man he war?"

The judge remained silent for a moment, considering, and then answered slowly:

"In appearance I should say that, at first glance, he looked a good deal like me—or Barton. In build, at least. But the face was quite different."

"Couldn't 'a' bin a long-lost brother, I s'pose?"

Rube pushed his questions to the verge of impudence; but he was a man without much delicacy, and hard to shake off when once he had an idea that he was on the way to make a point.

"No, of course not," responded the judge, decidedly. "There were but two of us brothers, Barton and myself. And by the way, what has become of Barton? He is not the man to hold back when any one is in danger. Don't say that he has met with harm."

An awkward silence followed. The judge's story came so straight that the men were actually forgetting the evidence of their eyesight until that last question brought it all back, and they recognized the real perplexities of the case.

"Fact are, jedge, we dunno what ter think. In course he war with us; but he left us kinder behind while he went ahead ter explore. Then he sent Paddy the Wheeler back, ter bring us up; an' he led us plum inter ther camp afore we found him. So, yer see, ef you don't know whar he is we've clean lost him."

Ready Rube's explanation recalled the Wheeler to mind, and the crowd looked around.

The prudent Irishman was missing; but the mention of his name had an effect upon the judge, who drew his hand wearily across his forehead.

"It seems to me I've heard of him. Who is he? Can you trust him?"

"Ye'r' gittin' it down fine, boss. That's a question we hev doubts on. Thar's bin some scull-druggery, somehow—an' I'm most a-thinkin' Paddy's at the bottom ov it. He ain't hyar now. Ef he *hez* got erway with Bart Brandt's baggage he's a leetle nearer ter solid lightnin' than I thort fur. I tell yer it's time ter be movin' round. We've got ther jedge—but somewhar ther's three er four more ter see after. We're not goin' ter stop till we make them solid. An' fur Paddy ther Wheeler—when we strike him I vote fur a hemp necktie."

"There is sense in what you say," put in the judge; "but Rube, you'll have to run the thing alone. I'm played out, and I want to get back to Black Dam. I *must* have rest and I want to see poor Rand. I'm all broke up to-day."

His voice sounded weaker and weaker, and when he ceased speaking he sunk back in something that almost looked like a swoon, though he added in a still huskier whisper:

"Where's the guard? I'll give in. Give me something to eat. I've been fasting all day, and something must be broken. I—I think I am hurt."

Two or three men jumped forward with flasks, and between them Brandt stood a fair chance of being deluged with the ardent. He coughed a little, stretched himself, and grew stronger.

"There, there. That will do," he muttered. "You are losing valuable time. Pursue the villains. It is not too late. They will go by the lower road. When you come to the forks you will know it. I heard them speak of it. Mart Lane, will you go back with me? I hate to ask it, but I'm afraid to risk it alone."

"Any way you want to fix it, judge. Of course if it was any one else I'd sooner stay with the Loys; but I can't go back on you. They're beginning to scatter for the trail, and you an' me may as well be movin'."

The men were very much in earnest, though the finding of the judge had somewhat demoralized them for the time being. There is no doubt the majority would have been willing to avoid a fight; but when they discovered that not half their work was done they were just as willing to be led forward in pursuit.

A dozen had already started to follow the flying outlaws, and when Bailey Brandt, accompanied by Mart Lane, picked his way slowly down the path which he pointed out, the rest were ready for business, and at once were on the move.

"No use, boycees. That infernal Irishman give us taffy, and then raked in our hotel. I ain't jest so sure 'bout Bart Brandt—it don't stand ter reason he c'u'd 'a' pulled ther wool over ther eyes ov his own brother quite so fur—but fur Paddy, I say, ef yer see him, shoot. Yer won't be fur wrong."

There was no cheer, since the party had once more got down to strict business; but from the low growl that ran through the crowd it was pretty sure that the Irishman would fare but badly if he fell into their hands.

Most likely Paddy the Wheeler had an idea to that same effect. In the excitement that followed the discovery of the road-agents, his prompt actions had delayed suspicion; but when the men of Black Dam had a breathing spell it occurred to them that if Bart Brandt had been playing a brace game, Paddy the Wheeler must be keeping his cues, and had perhaps attempted to lead them into a trap, where they could be slaughtered.

The Irishman was wise enough to anticipate this, was not so foolhardy as to want to fight an army, and had skipped.

No novice was he either.

He ran down the ledge, as though looking for a route to throw himself upon the trail of the flying outlaws, a revolver in either hand, and never once looking behind.

Then he suddenly disappeared from sight, and unless there was instant pursuit it was the Bank of California to an old sardine-box that he would not be overtaken.

Pursuit of him there was none, since no eye had been on him when he vanished, and the trail of the agents led in a totally different direction, while he, with reckless haste, was striking for the stage trail that led from Black Dam to Cactus Fork.

For an hour or more he pursued a winding course, rough and blind. Then he halted suddenly at the edge of a yawning barranca, and peered downward, his face full of the surprise he felt.

"Howly Moses," he exclaimed. "Phat's that Oisee forninst me? It's ther lectle dumb girrul hersilf, er Paddy ther Wheeler's a howlin' liar, from ther upper section av Liarsville. Oi've struck oil at last."

CHAPTER XXXV.

BILLY COMES FOR ALL HE'S WORTH.

THADDEUS ROUSVELDT gave himself up for lost when the horse plunged forward over the edge of the chasm, and then dropped from under him. It seemed to him, as much as to the outlaws left behind him, that he was dropping to certain death.

That thought flashed over him; and then he knew nothing more.

The road-agents uttered their warning cry; then, when they saw it was too late, went silently up to the edge of the barranca and peered downward.

Horse and man lay, a little apart, each in a ghastly, crumpled heap. One of Rousveldt's arms was doubled under him, and his face was already a mask of blood. He gave no sign of life, and the men gazing at him drew a long breath and turned away. In a moment their excitement was over.

"It's lucky we had him cleaned out afore he tumbled," suggested one. "Ef there's anything I hate it's handlin' a corpse; an' it saves ther risk ov goin' down. I can't say he's kivered; but he's got as deep a grave ez thar's ary use fur."

"You bet. An' ez ther boss hez no use fur a corpse we'll let him lay."

"A blamed good hoss lost. There'll be a kick 'bout that; but ef he war fool ernuf ter break his neck we'd be bigger fools ter try ter mend it. That jist winds that racket, an' there won't be no more said about it. I don't s'pose ther friends would stand a hundred er two fur ther body. They'd ax ugly questions, an' shake us in ther end. Men-kind are rascally ongrateful."

And so the men went their way, leaving their victim with scarcely a second thought when he was no longer of value to them.

He had lain there some little time. The sound of the departing footsteps had died away, and the silence was becoming oppressive, when there was a noise between a sigh and a groan, and a lithe figure stole out from where it had been concealed under an overhanging ledge of rock, and moving with light steps, to his side bent over him.

At that very moment Rousveldt gave a low moan and opened his eyes. There was little intelligence in them, but as they rested upon Helen Harcourt they actually seemed to brighten.

She was startled at the unexpected signs of life, but did not lose her self-possession. Softly she examined the wound in his head, which did not seem to be so bad save for the loss of blood it caused, and felt the beating of his heart. Then she looked up at the light from which he had fallen, and back again to the young man, shaking her head in a not altogether unhopeful way, while she carefully raised him so that his arm was no longer twisted under him.

That done she ran away, returning in a moment with a handkerchief dripping with water from a pool in the rock near by.

A few drops in his mouth, a little bathing of his head, and Rousveldt revived, at the same time uttering a groan.

After that his return to complete consciousness was rapid; though he stared up at the girl as though he was not sure she was not a creation of a disordered brain.

A little of the color came back into her face, and she smiled faintly, as once more she wiped away the blood and then bound up the heavy cut upon his forehead. Slowly, and watching to see that he understood, she spelled out with her fingers:

"Are you hurt much? What can I do?"

"I'm, ah, better than a dead man, ah; but it must, ah, have been a terrible shock, and my arm, ah, is broken in forty pieces, ah."

He spoke by instinct, and like one weak and in pain. Then he remembered himself, and replied in the signs she had used:

"Not dead but badly shaken. Arm broken. Afraid you cannot help me. Can you save yourself?"

She nodded encouragingly and then drew him a little aside, so that he was hidden, just as she had been at the time of his fall, from any one who might happen from above.

In spite of himself he uttered a groan. He found that not only his arm but his leg had been injured in the fall, and that of himself he was utterly helpless. He wished that the fall had been at once fatal. The girl was his only hope; yet how could she aid him?

That was the question that was troubling Helen, herself. So far as she knew she could no more get out of the narrow canyon than he. She had entered it in much the same way, though by a slide rather than a fall; and it was impossible to retrace her steps, even if that would not take her back to the outlaws from whom she had escaped. She had sought refuge here, intending to lie hidden until pursuit was over, and then do the best she could. Now, she had a companion in her misery, who, at present, was suffering far more than she. What was to be the up-shot?

In silence the two turned toward each other, and were twisting and twining their fingers when darkness came down.

Paddy the Wheeler, on his way to the Cactus Fork trail, came suddenly up to the brink above, and caught sight only of the girl below. His word, of course, did not reach her ears, but as she was staring straight upward at the time, she saw him the instant his form arose between her and the horizon beyond; and she at once wheeled and darted out of sight.

The Irishman did not hesitate himself.

He was prepared for the work, and meant what he said. Unslinging a coiled lariat from his belt, he tossed one end over and down, while he knotted the other around a sharp frustum of rock.

"In course they s'arched ther girrul, an' she kin have no weepins. Av Oi can't kape her Oi'll kill her—an' aither way Oi'll swear it'll be plazin' to ther boss."

With wonderful agility he made his way down the rope; keeping an eye around for signs of any attack; and when he reached the ground, he darted fiercely at Helen.

With weapons on her hands the girl had more courage than the most; but now, unable to resist, she turned instinctively to flight, though there was small space and no hope. Thaddeus Rousveldt, racked and weakened by hours of suffering, was powerless to help; and perhaps, even in the midst of her terror, Helen in some way thought she was doing her best for his safety in drawing attention away from him.

Down the ragged bed of the canyon she darted, until stopped where the walls closed in. At that she turned again, when the man was almost within reach of her, and nimbly darted under his outstretched arm.

He stumbled in trying to seize her, and recovered more angry than ever. When Helen had won her way almost back to the point at which he had first seen her she, too, stumbled, and before she was fairly on her feet again he seized her by the throat.

"Course yez fur a mad woilde-cat! I have yez now, an' be ther powers it's did mate ye'll be whin me hand lits go. Ther boss w'u'd give big money fur yez aloive—mebbe it's a few dollars he'll spud out whin ye'r did."

His left hand tightened on her throat, his right hovered over her breast, just ready to sink the knife he had drawn, when he heard a groan.

He delayed the stroke, and gave a quick glance toward the spot from whence the sound seemed to come. He saw there Thaddeus Rousveldt, unarmed and almost helpless, slowly and painfully dragging his body toward him.

There was a world of true grit behind the store clothes and curious drawl of the young tenderfoot. If he could not aid the girl, he could die with her, and that was what he meant, since there was nothing else left him.

A better man than Paddy the Wheeler might have been moved by such a display of sand; but the cur blood in him was in the ascendant. He cruelly calculated the time that this contemptible assailant would take to reach him and then raised his knife again.

It was the moment of doom—but not for Helen. There was a strange, weird, and yet almost ludicrous interruption. A little figure came pitching down the face of the barranca wall, at the spot where it was roughest, and least perpendicular, and twenty feet or more above their heads it launched itself into the air.

It was the missing Billy, who had at last found his mistress, and dropped, with his four feet held closely together, full upon Paddy the Wheeler's head.

The man went down as though struck by lightning, and lay motionless, while Billy capered around his mistress, who slowly sunk away in another nerveless heap.

That the neck of the Irishman was not broken by the shock, was a wonder; but it was still more wonderful that when he had lain there for a few moments he drew himself together, and raised, just as Rousveldt snatched from his belt the revolver the ruffian had failed to use, and with a convulsive pull at the trigger lifted the self-acting hammer and fired.

After that all was still in the little canyon.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE SPRING OF THE TRAP.

THE men from Black Dam had more luck than judgment, since, by the merest chance, they stumbled upon a practicable path down to the bottom of the canyon which the road-agents had held, and from which they had vanished. They were thus saved the necessity of retracing their steps, and losing perhaps an hour of time. Before the judge and his companions had got a quarter of their way down, the men he had left behind him had made the descent and were in hot pursuit along the natural roadway that opened out before them.

They penetrated the labyrinth of seams and gashes in reckless haste, only anxious to overtake the enemy ahead. When they had journeyed for perhaps an hour, and were beginning to feel the effects of the tearing pace, there suddenly rang out, not far ahead a chorus of pistol-shots.

"Hooray!" yelled Rube. "Some ov ther boys hez blocked 'em off, an' will strike 'em at last!"

Hardly had he spoken when a bullet whistled close to his ear; and there was no longer a doubt but that the enemy was in front, and on the watch for them.

There was not even the semblance of a check to the mad rush; and a turn in the canyon they were following uncovered the sentinel who had taken the shot at Ready Rube. He was running down a steep incline; and beyond could be seen the rest of the gang.

The meaning of the shots just heard was no longer in doubt, either. The road-agents were caught in a trap. The men of Black Dam were coming on them, three to one, as they huddled in a knot; while on the crown of a steep little ascent, behind a barricade of rock that stretched clean across what was there a narrow way, three men coolly disputed their progress.

Half-way up the incline lay several motionless forms, while two or three wounded men staggered or crawled painfully back toward their comrades.

It was only a matter of fifty yards; but to pass that under the fire of men who worked as fast as fingers could crook, and never missed, was a terrible thing, though the appearance of Ready Rube and his men in their rear showed that it had to be done. On both sides the advantage of position was against them.

In front were the fewest, and, the crown of the little hill once stormed the advantage of position would be with them. To the front the road-agents dashed.

Then the three men rose up, and dropped an outlaw at nearly every shot, while from the rear the men of Black Dam rushed in, pell-mell.

It all went on like a flash. One moment there were three little armies, the next but one. After that weight told.

The leader of the outlaws was the only man of them all that escaped—he had dropped half-way up the hill and had been passed in the rush. He gathered himself up and dashed back over the way he had come.

The boldness of the trick helped to insure its success; and though a little later search was made for him it was too late. He had vanished.

"Ef this court knows herself, which she thinks she does," remarked Pocket Pete, sliding forward with his hands suggestively hidden, "thar won't be no more foolishness with us. Ef me, an' Double-Shot Dave, an' Cool Cal hedn't chipped, whar, oh, whar would you all 'a' kim out at?"

The questions were rather pertinent ones, for at least two or three had been in very bad odor when they left Black Dam; and in spite of the way they had come to the help of Ready Rube and his followers it was possible that some one might want to ask ridiculous questions.

"Oh, dry up on that," answered Rube. "I b'lieve ye'r solid, from ther ground up. Bart Brandt ain't hyer, cuss him, ner Paddy ther Wheeler; an' them war yer speshul friends. Ef ary one else wants ter say, I'll crowd ther words back down ther throats. Shake. We're all on ther same level. Did yer hear anything 'bout ther gal?"

After the way Bart Brandt had played him Rube was ready for anything.

"If you mean Miss Rand, she is probably

back in Black Dam. That was the way she was heading when I saw her last. When you get there you can hear her tell her own story, and you'll find that she wasn't very badly lost. Now then, pitch in. There's an awful lot of stiff and wounded men; and I suppose, you're going to do the fair thing by them?"

"You kin gamble on all that," answered Rube, comprehensively.

A dozen men were already darting back in pursuit of the one man who had got away; and the rest were looking closely and carefully after the prisoners. After they had been made secure some attention was paid to the wounded—and the most of them found to be past praying for.

If the gang was not exterminated, it was surely hard hit; and it was decided that a strong guard, with such as might be able to travel, should set out at once for Black Dam. The town no doubt would want to see the prisoners, before they were swung off, and perhaps by morning some of them might be willing to shed a little light on subjects concerning which they sulkily refused to talk.

Arrangements were rapidly made, and soon those who were told off to attend to the wounded were at their work, while the rest were ready to start on their homeward way, or continue the search for the road-agents and their prisoners, if they had any.

As the way by which one-armed Dave and his pards had flanked the outlaws seemed to be the shortest route to Black Dam, it was voted to follow that trail, and before very long Granger was striding ahead, keeping wary watch in every direction, while the rest followed close at his heels. The day was going very fast, and once having made up their minds that they were to spend the night in town those on the return were anxious to lose no time.

"I'll go with you till you come to the turn," Cal Barret had whispered; "after that I'll prick my flint and try it again. From what I have heard, my poor girl escaped from their hands, and they have not yet recaptured her. She may have made her way towards Black Dam, or Cactus Fork, or still be lingering in the mountains. For fear of the last I'll not give up here until I know more certainly about it. The men here will back me, now."

"Kerrect, pard; an' Pocket Pete stays with yer. Dave hez work on hand, that can't be put off; but when he gits that in shape ef yer need him you'll find him 'round ag'in. Oh, I tell yer, we'll make this ther round-up ov ther season afore we're through with it."

Barret nodded and said nothing further. His face had a pained and pinched expression, and the work he had been doing, and all that he had suffered, was telling on him. He hardly looked as though he could stand many more hours of it, and Pocket Pete's promise was more of a boom than he seemed willing to acknowledge. When the two men had met him he had not asked for their assistance, and now that there was a chance that they might have him he had no objections to interpose.

Half an hour passed. The prisoners plodded doggedly along and their captors grimly kept them covered.

Then Pocket Pete suddenly halted, and pointed to a little mountain gulch, a gash in the rocks that came out of the canyon wall, some twenty feet above their heads.

"Ginger, molleygrubs!" he exclaimed, "that are, ef it don't admit ov harder sw'ar-in'. Ef yander ain't Billy hisself, an' heap full ov information, I'm a howlin' liar. Betcher sweet life we're on pay gravel at last, an' all we've got ter do are ter take ther p'intz ez he gives 'em, an' salt 'em down."

Sure enough, with neck outstretched, and eyes twinkling, the goat rasped out a cordial greeting that showed there was some one more than a stranger near.

"The girl!" gasped Barret, showing the excitement that was too much for him. "Helen! She is somewhere near. Follow him. He will take you to her. I—I—can't."

As he spoke he swayed uneasily, and put his hands up to his head. A sudden darkness had come over him, and a little more and the cool little sport would have fainted on the trail.

Pocket Pete understood if none of the rest did. He glanced upward, saw that the as-

cent was practicable, and without a moment's hesitation started on his way. Then Cal Barret, recovering himself, followed after, and half a dozen or more came in his wake.

The goat greeted them with another blast of bleats and bats—then turned and ambled cheerfully away, with Pocket Pete and the rest in excited pursuit.

After a little the animal bounded up another little ascent and turning sharply down a natural roadway for twenty yards halted on the edge of a narrow chasm.

Pocket Pete, coming up to his side, saw three bodies lying on the floor of the barranca, and a rope, leading down over the face of the wall, offered a convenient way of descent.

"Hurrah!" he shouted, to those behind. "We've got 'em at last!"

Then, without waiting longer, he swung himself over, and began the descent.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BART BRANDT COMES BACK.

THERE had never before been such a time in Black Dam.

First Judge Brandt reappeared. He came up to the little shanty that had been run up at the ruins of the Colonnade; and he was meekness itself as he asked a few questions, and then crawled off to his own den. The men had provided for his physical needs; and he said that what he wanted was rest. When he got out again in the morning he would answer all questions, and give any points that Mart Lane might miss.

As he touched with his hand the door of his office a hard-looking case slouched around the corner of the cabin, and held up his hand:

"Say, you! Yer ain't goin' back on Paddy an' me, be yer? It's a tough trail we've hed ter travel, an' my pard left me—"

"Who are you—what do I know about you and your pard? Leave me alone or I'll have the citizens walk you out of camp."

The judge passed in, and slammed the door behind him.

"Oh! he's goin' ter shake Paddy an' me—er hev I got ther wrong pig by ther ear? In course, I see. It's ther jedge got back. Whew! Suthin' gone wrong. We'll hev ter pump ther balance afore we 'range our leetle lay-out."

He went on to the Emporium.

The crowd there was thin but enthusiastic. If it had not been so late, every man would have been ready to start at once to join the searching party in the mountains. Everybody that had coin was ready to set them up for all hands, and the worst elements of Black Dam were simmering in the preliminary heat of a general tear when the next arrival took place.

If it had not been for the firm stand taken by the men who guarded them, the coming of the captured outlaws would have been immediately followed with a massacre by rope. It took some plain talk and a display of revolvers to save them from the crowd that came whooping up from the Emporium. When it was heard that there were more to come, and that two prisoners, retaken from the outlaws, were on the way, though badly injured, and that there would be a grand trial scene in the morning and an execution a little later, the would-be lynchers gracefully yielded, and prepared for standing guard and keeping things moving through the night.

From what the new-comers said, they had found Paddy the Wheeler dead at the bottom of the barranca, Thaddeus Rousveldt badly injured, though with a fair chance for life, and Helen Harcourt only overcome by excitement. She revived very soon, and was drawn up in the arms of Cool Cal, Rousveldt following in spite of the horrible pain the necessarily rough handling caused him.

The young man had a wonderful amount of nerve under that soft, white skin of his; and as he insisted on being taken to Black Dam at once, whether the trip killed him or not, he was being brought along.

While Pocket Pete, who had come with the first flight, was explaining this to a knot of anxious listeners, a man stood behind him eagerly drinking in his words. The man was Judge Brandt, who had staggered out of his office upon hearing the noise that was made over the arrivals.

When he had heard the outline of the story he quietly took a look at the prisoners, and was about turning away when a slight motion, made by one of the evil-looking of the lot, attracted his attention. He hesitated, then sidled up to the man.

"Well?" he said, interrogatively.

"It ain't well at all," retorted the prisoner, with a savage scowl. "It looks ez though Bart Brandt hed been swingin' fur all ther game, an' when he lost his grip he war willin' ter let us stick. Pair play, er we'll make it lively fur him. Ther lam's at Black Dam are jest beginnin' ter suspect; ef we set 'em up on the racket they won't find it hard ter reach him, an' he'll swing 'longside ov us. Kin yer do ary thing ter help us? Talk quick, fur we mean it! Afore we stretch hemp we'll split wide open!"

"My poor, misguided brother," groaned the judge, in a scarcely audible tone.

"Misguided nothin'! He was ther king-pin ov ther hull lay-out. It war his nuts we war pullin' outen ther fire. Ef this thing ain't stopped thar won't be no place fur him, frum Colorado to ther coast. Ef ther men at Black Dam wer'n't fools frum Fooltown, they'd 'a' dropped to it, an' mebbe they ain't sich fools ez they look. Kin yer save him—an' us?"

"Hush, hush! Not so loud. They can only suspect. Keep a close mouth, and what I can do I will. My only fear is that he will be rash enough to again risk his neck here. I have feared, but now I know. Yes. To save him you can count on me, and when I have my men around me I am a power, I pledge you my word."

The conversation was carried on in an undertone and in the midst of great risk. There were plenty of curious ears, and only the respect due to the most prominent citizen of the place kept the crowd back. Half a dozen had noted that the conversation was going on, and the majority suspected more or less of its nature. Steady a face as the judge had kept over it, there was a pretty general belief that he suspected his brother of being in league with the outlaws, if not actually their leader. How far Bailey Brandt would go to save Barton was a curious question, the answer to which was awaited with interest, even though it might never be known.

When the judge went away there was actually a feeling of relief.

Under other circumstances he would have been expected to take a prominent part in the disposition of affairs; but now, with the report that was rolling around, and momentarily swelling, it was felt that the less he heard that night the less his feelings would be hurt.

Black Dam did not boast of a regular jail; but the cabin of Cripple Kent was generally used as a temporary lock-up, Kent himself being a sort of imitation marshal—when he happened to be at home. He was a very good man in spite of his name, handy with the tools, and not deficient in nerve. The slight hitch in his gait that had given him his *sobriquet* did not interfere at all with his locomotive powers, and had he been on hand he would have been one of the foremost of the rescuing party. In his absence over the mountain his cabin was tenantless; and so it was taken possession of without question. The outlaws, all bound, were deposited there, and it was arranged that a dozen men, under the orders of Ready Rube, should remain there, taking turns in keeping watch.

It might seem strange that a man who was so intimate with the judge as was Ready Rube should be allowed to run matters, after the suspicions that had been bruited around; but he had put himself to the front with such good results during the chase and now was so thoroughly in earnest that no one cared to doubt him.

He had, in addition, told off his guard from the crowd in an impartial manner, only selecting men whom it was undoubtedly safe to trust.

The guard was to spend the night in and around Cripple Kent's cabin, four to remain on the watch at a time, while the others, with their weapons at hand, were to be ready for work if called on.

Until long after midnight there was an unwonted stir in the town; and during all the hours Ready Rube, wide awake, watched his charge. He had decided that for him there should be no relief.

For a while there was conversation enough to keep every one awake; and between his interest in the matter, and the nervousness caused by the wound in his hand he did not believe, as he saw one man after another drop off to slumber, that he would be at all tempted to follow suit—even though the prisoners, who had most of all at stake, seemed to be sleeping the soundest.

It wanted but a few minutes of three o'clock, the hour at which the guard was to be relieved, when Rube noted that he was the only man in the room who was awake. He was drowsier himself than he knew of or he would have said something. As it was, he held his peace. He was watching, and for the very short time they had yet to serve it was hardly worth while to awaken them.

He kept his eyes on the men that were huddled together in one corner of the room, and while he stared at them in the not altogether certain light their forms blurred together and for a moment vanished altogether.

He roused himself with a start, and then uttered a cry. Beyond a doubt the prisoners had moved, had fallen a little apart, had drawn their limbs under them, and had their faces turned toward him.

The cry was as good as a signal.

From the floor bounded the outlaws, their severed bonds dropping away from wrists and ankles, as they hurled themselves upon their guards, tearing at the weapons in belts and hands.

"Bart Brandt!" exclaimed Ready Rube, and then last of all rose a tall figure, a man with a revolver in his hand, who shot as he rose.

To the floor pitched Rube, while through the door burst the prisoners.

The guards without at the first cry had started to their feet, and quickest of them all Pocket Pete. He saw a tall figure in the doorway and without an instant's hesitation raised his hand and fired.

The tall figure fell back and vanished, but the escaping prisoners, darting across the street, shot as they ran, while the guards went streaming after.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CLOSE OF THE TRAIL.

POCKET PETE did not follow in the pursuit. On the contrary he dashed straight into the cabin, his pistols ready in his hands.

Before him lay the body of Ready Rube; beyond that the room was tenantless.

He saw, though, at a glance, the hole in the floor, that was made by pushing a board aside, through which Bart Brandt had entered, and guessed at the little game. The outlaw leader had come back alone to rescue his men, and having turned them loose had thrown himself down while the guards had passed. Then he had essayed to follow, but failing in that had departed by the way he had come.

All this flashed across his mind while he stared an instant around the room. Then he dodged out again, and circled around the cabin.

As he had suspected, he could see a man in the distance. Bart Brandt was running straight toward the judge's office. As he went he lurched now and then from side to side, and stumbled, but still ran on.

Without wasting a breath Pocket Pete darted off, accelerating his pace as he saw the man fling himself against the judge's door, and then disappear.

Almost at the same time he caught sight of another man running light in the same direction, and much nearer than himself to the spot.

Pete's footsteps fell swiftly but softly, scarcely making a sound; but when he reached the building the other man, half turning, held up his hand for silence, then bent his head lower as if to listen. Within voices could be heard, and seeing that the door was firmly closed Pete, too, bent forward his ear. It was not hard to recognize the voices. At first the judge spoke; his voice quavering and weak:

"Barton, Barton, it has come at last. Why did you come here at all; why venture back to ruin both yourself and me? I could have kept the mouths of your ruffians shut so that at least nothing could be positively known. If you had been wise you would have been miles off before this."

The other voice broke in savagely:

"Yes, and you would have been posing as the good little Abel, who had got away from wicked Cain by the skin of your teeth. Curse you for a white-hearted coward, anyhow. Are you going to help me?"

"Help you—after what you have done! And how can I?"

"I don't know," answered the other, recklessly. "All I do know is that I am bored through and through. I don't want to pull hemp if I can help it. If you could arrange for me to die in peace you'd be acting very white."

There was a quaver and a weakness about the last words; Pocket Pete listened eagerly for the answer.

"Not so bad as that! Oh, Barton Brandt, I am no coward. And they will scarcely hang me for helping my own brother. There is a way. Come."

At that the two men, as if acting by a common impulse, waited no longer. With a united crash they threw their shoulders against the door, which shivered, and creaked, but did not yield.

Again they hurled themselves at it, and felt the bolts giving. Then, as it went in they might faintly have heard the sound of a horse breaking away from the rear of the house in a headlong gallop.

The two entered with a rush, and found Judge Brandt ready for them, pale but void of anger or surprise.

"Gentlemen," he said. "You are a little too late. I know your errand, and cannot blame you. Perhaps you may think I have done wrong. If so I am ready to answer any and all charges. Had you applied in a proper manner I would have opened my door. As you entered I would have been justified in shooting you. Now that you are here, so long as you offer no violence, work your will."

Pocket Pete rushed toward the open window that he saw beyond. It seemed to him that he understood the meaning of the hoof-beats. He and Dave Granger had turned loose the horses they had borrowed the other evening, and Black Tiger might have been picketed near to the office, in anticipation of some such emergency. Bart Brandt was probably off and away.

The other man was cooler.

"Hold hard, purty," he exclaimed. "My pard is out yonder. He'll carry that part of the contract. Stay by me while I finish up this."

Pocket Pete looked around in surprise. He recognized the man known as Jack, who had come to Black Dam with Paddy the Wheeler, and scarcely knew what course to take. While he hesitated he heard the sound of a distant pistol-shot.

"That settles it," said Jack coldly. "Dave Granger never shoots unless he means to plug the bull's-eye. When he comes back the judge will be easier, one way or another."

From the front, a dozen men crowded in. In spite of the number that had trailed off in pursuit of the fleeing outlaws there were plenty left in Black Dam who would not miss the slenderest chance for a circus.

While they were excitedly asking what was going on, One-Armed Dave sprang in through the window, followed by Cal Barret.

"It beats me, Jack," was his entering salutation. "I've just downed a horse, but he had no rider. If you haven't nailed him the villain has given us the slip after all. What does this precious brother of his, the judge, say?"

"Nothin'," spoke up Pete. "Look out. I sw'ar, he's on his journey home."

The judge had drawn himself up, with his hand on his revolver, but it was at Cal Barret that he looked. He half raised his wrist, gave a choking cry, and then fell motionless while they looked.

"Ah," exclaimed Cal Barret, springing forward, "the hound! It is Barton Brandt, himself. How has he fooled you all?"

As he spoke he jerked up his pistol; an instant more and he would have lodged a bullet in the prostrate form.

Dave Granger was too quick for him. With a rapid motion he dashed aside the weapon, just as Jack dropped upon the prostrate man, and half a dozen voices chorused:

"If that's so, where's ther judge?"

Jack tore away the collar from the neck

of Brandt, and pointed to a long white scar that had been hidden.

"I swear he fooled me, too, but he can do it no longer. There is the scar the judge got when Harry the Hawk had him lined, down at Rat Trap. You all know the mark."

"An' hyer's the marks I put on Bart Brandt a bit ago," said Pete, in wonder. He could even yet hardly believe.

"Gentlemen," added Jack, "if you can't understand I'll have to tell you. Bailey Brandt is his own brother, and I, a detective from Frisco, have run him down. I want him for the murder of his wife, Mira Blair that was, in the 'way back. I'm a shade too late. Our friend here, of the capacious pockets, has drilled him, and I think he is about to climb the golden stairs. Perhaps something can be done for him. It actually seems a pity for a man with such sand to die."

While he spoke he had moved Brandt's weapons out of reach, and then examined his wounds.

The older one was a trifle; but the one received at Cripple Kent's cabin placed him beyond praying for—with any hope, though he was not dead.

His lips moved. Then his voice grew suddenly stronger.

"Liar," he said, and every one of the listeners heard him. "Mira Blair had other names before she became my wife. I may have tried to kill her, but I failed in that, as in all the rest. If you don't believe it, look. There she stands, and can speak for herself. I did not recognize her all along, though I did her child; but I know her now."

And as he spoke the axes of his eyes pointed straight at the effeminate face of Cool Cal Barret.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE FINISHING TOUCHES.

WHILE these astounding revelations were being made, Black Dam was gathering as if by magic, and it seemed already as if the whole town must be there, though, really, between the men back in the mountains, and the other men following the outlaws who had escaped from the cabin, the turn-out was not as good as it might have been if all the people had been at home. At all events, everything else was forgotten, and everybody had an interest only in what was transpiring in the judge's office. Where they came from at that hour was a question.

Cal Barret never winced at the strange statement of the judge. On the contrary he—or she—swung boldly forward.

"Yes, you are right. I am the woman that once was Thomas Hazlitt's wife, and afterward, when he died—Heaven forgive me—yours. When I found you, after the years I had lost in searching, I swore I would slay you; but not with a treacherous blow, such as you would have dealt at me and mine. You would have killed me, you would have murdered my poor Helen, had not your strokes failed of their full aim. You robbed us both of the wealth that a better man left us, and when you found that we still lived you turned on us again. Was it a wonder I was maddened?"

"When I crawled out to life once more, I vowed to be avenged, but found that you in turn had vanished. I knew you would come back, and I made all things ready for you. Hazlitt became Harcourt, and, unsexed even, I lived under more than one name."

"Yet I did not want to murder you, even when I found good evidence that you were in league with, if not the head of, the men who have terrorized the mountains. Chance for a time seemed in your favor. The luck that never failed with others deserted me; you found where to strike, and were ready for the blow. Then chance, only, saved Helen and me. You, poor, pitiful villain, what have you to say for yourself? By lead or hemp the end has come, and I do not regret that after all my intentions my hands are clear of your blood."

She flung her words at him with a savage bitterness that did bring something like a flush to his face, yet his nerve did not fail him.

"If Black Dam listens to you, they will be apt to see that I had some excuse, even if I was bad as all that. It's not worth while to argue, though. I didn't kill you, that is certain; and if I had life enough left to be worth fighting for, I think I could manage

for the rest. As it is, do your worst. I have at least the satisfaction of being able to throw in your teeth how I fooled you all. If I had not played for all I saw in the ring, I might have succeeded, too. It was the cursed Blair fortune that ruined me. Barton Brandt, the road-agent, on whom the detectives were closing in, would have disappeared for good and all; and anyway they couldn't hang Bailey for what Bart had done. Oh, it was the nicest kind of a game; and maybe if even I had been willing to leave a few of my pet lambs to die among you wolves, I might have hit the turn. Ha! ha! Divide the Short Ridge among you! I've held it as long as it did me good, and now I can't carry it along."

"If you did it would melt, sure," muttered Pocket Pete, who, in spite of his sangfroid, was somewhat bewildered by the revelations of the night.

"An' blame little stock hev yer got in it ter leave," interposed Jerry Tucker, who had just come bustling in. "Seth Rogers an' his crowd hev bu'sted in from their level, cleaned out what little ov yer gang war left behind, an' fair an' squar' jumped yer claim. Betwixt them an' old Hank Green's, I reckon they lay all over ther Short Ridge. Fact are, jedge, after ther way yer bin a-playin' us, thar ain't none got any too much mercy, an' I jest guess it's about time fur yer to retire. Dog-gone ye, ef I must say it, yer bu'sted me all up when yer blowed up ther Colonnade!"

"Go slow, old man. That's the one thing I didn't do."

At the charge, Brandt flashed up a little.

"It was pure, cussed luck, and hurt me worse than all. Was the girl killed?"

No one answered the question at once. Some did not know; and none could explain what had happened until Dave Granger stepped forward.

"I'd help you if I could; but your body is past doing anything for, and angels couldn't help your soul. Still I can tell you, Miss Rand was not hurt, and was not even in the hotel, when your scoundrels were prowling around in search of her. She had a hint, and took a notion it would be safer to stay with Carl Demming's wife, and had quietly slipped out. I knew something of the arrangement but I didn't give it away, and the old man was too befuddled to think. Therefore, both then and now, I think we've made our game all around—with a little outside assistance, for which I am willing to give due credit. Hank Green has a good show for being a millionaire; and Miss Rand has found her sister. If Black Dam will allow me I will take charge here, and see that you have a chance to die in peace. Jack, show out the spectators and we'll draw the curtain."

It was time. The judge had played his last card—and lost. Weaker and weaker he had grown, until now the death-damp was settling on his brow. He closed his eyes, and the end was not far off.

There was no great amount of affection wasted when the sisters met, as meet they did. Dave Granger had been quick to make the most of the revelation of the dying man, and had prepared Miss Rand for the story she listened to. They managed to make an amicable arrangement in regard to the property, and Mira received her full share without the world being much the wiser in regard to her existence. For a time the gambler-woman had even refused to think of accepting it; but the mention of her daughter's interests prevailed. She sold the Hargrave claim quietly, in which there was a little fortune and went back to the East, with the Rands and though seeing little of them was not altogether a stranger in their household. Old Hannah, who had been at last frightened when her charge escaped her, but who turned up on the search, went along.

Mira Blair had been a beautiful woman in her time, before she married her first husband. Her daughter, when garbed to advantage, was much more lovely in spite of her infirmity. Was it any wonder that Thaddeus Rousveldt, convalescing under her ministrations, should perceive all that, and forgetting his penchant for Miss Rand, woo and win? If the outlaws robbed him of his baggage, which he never recovered, they presented him with a wife.

Miss Belle was certainly not heart-broken over his defection. She was young yet, and had never looked very favorably on Rousveldt's suit; when she knew that he had transferred his allegiance to her niece she was very willing to utter the trite old benediction, "Take her, and be happy."

As for Bailey—he is certainly a traveled gentleman, since he made the trip across the continent in grand style. It is an actual fact that Mrs. Rousveldt received him more cordially—when his story had been told—than she did his fair mistress. When last heard from he was boss of a respectable livery stable, and bid fair to live to a great old age.

Double-Shot Dave—for the name stuck to him for years after—gave them all a very cheerful good-by. Put on the trail by their lawyer his identity had been concealed from the Rands until the last moment. He had managed to work in their cases together, and in consideration of the very liberal payments received for what he considered but ordinary work he would have been perfectly happy if the denouement at Black Dam had not so completely given away his profession. He and his pard, Jack Lord, remained around the camp for some time, finishing up the job about the gang of Captain Snow, and then went away without explaining the things the curious were dying to know. Just how Jack had wrung in with Paddy the Wheeler as a pard, was never revealed, nor the way he gave him the slip and got back to Black Dam, but any way it seemed a pity that such a pretty plant should have been so little needed. It had helped, of course; yet the work could have been done with less risk, even if Lord had been a few moments, or hours, longer in suspecting the single identity of Bart Brandt and his brother.

As to Pocket Pete—a waif like he was has no history except in his present. He had a fund of curiosity and a large stock of perseverance and pluck; but the less said about his moral qualities the better. He was willing to hit the outlaws out of revenge; he backed Granger through gratitude; and came near to slaying Ready Rube after all the rest of the circus was over, through pure generosity. Rube, ousted from the Short Ridge, to which Hank Green and the Rogers crowd hung on, tried to finish up the very pretty quarrel he had started—and again was foiled. Despairing of ever being a chief again in camp he departed, and Pocket Pete did not linger much longer. Just before he made his farewell bow to the town he interviewed Granger.

"You're a good man ter tie to," he said, "an' solid from ther ground up. Ef I ever git a chance, an' ye need it, I'll hit em ag'in. By, by. We didn't yearn ter do it, an' yit, somehow, we stood ther racket tergether. An' arhyow, when ther cold wave struck Black Dam we didn't git left. Not much, an' never will ef we're workin' on ther same level. We're a team on wheels, an' let them ez hears it put that in the'r pocket an' salt it down."

THE END.

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